

OPIA

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OPIA

by [MightBeOrphanedIdk](#)

Summary

The ambiguous intensity of looking someone in the eye, which can feel simultaneously invasive and vulnerable.

'Who is this child to *you*?'

'He's the last thing left of the woman I loved.'

'We'll keep him. As long as he needs to be dependant on someone, we'll keep him here.'

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OR:

What if Eren was raised by the Scouts after the fall of Shiganshina?

UNFINISHED!!!! THIS IS MARKED AS COMPLETE BUT IT IS UNFINISHED!!!!!!
(Please read preamble!)

Notes

DID YOU GUYS HEAR ME THIS WORK IS UNFINISHED!!!!!!!

Thank you for reading :D

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1: Preamble

Hello! A quick word before I begin.

While in the process of writing this fic, I came to learn that sometimes, people with no respect for actual artists/writers will AI generate a story and post a multi-chapter fic in one day using the AI. That news was disturbing to me, as I planned to write my entire story out before publishing it, allowing me to edit and improve my story no matter where I've written up to. They need to understand that writing, art, anything creative is not something they are entitled to— It is a privilege they only receive with practice, dedication, and labour.

I feel, as someone who strongly refuses AI, it is extremely important for you, the reader, to know that I did not use an ounce of AI in this fic. From start to end, inspiration to actual drafting to researching, everything is all thought-out and manually written by a real person (me). I regularly write a portion, go back, edit from the start, re-read over and over again until I'm satisfied.

Why am I saying this? I say this because I know that some people click on fics, check the publishing dates, and block the user based on how quickly the fic was made. This is a right move with poor execution. For one, there are people like me who already have the fic written and publish it in one go. For two, others may wait a few days before releasing another pre-written chapter.

I don't want people to miss out on something I've worked hard on and put so much thought into because others are incompetent. So again, I will repeat,

NO AI WAS USED WHILE WRITING!!!

With that out of the way, **here are a few things that I am going to ignore in canon for the sake of this fic:**

- Eren needs to have intent to turn into a titan as well in order to transform— He just needs intent and self-harm, not necessarily the will to become a titan. Pretty sure this is canon but regardless it's here.
- Eren needs to make contact with royal blood to remember everything from both the future and past— didn't do that, he regains them naturally as if remembering something he'd intentionally blocked out from memory. Future memories however do need contact with royal blood.

- Erwin's recruitment speech happens after the invasion of Trost— WRONG the invasion happens after the speech, I think it works better with the plot so that's what I'm choosing to do
- Mostly everything being in British spelling except for Mum — I just think Mom works better in this context; i can't even lie I think mom is way more effective than mum for a character like Eren. Idk how to explain it sorry

Chapter 2: Kuebiko

Chapter Summary

A state of exhaustion inspired by acts of senseless violence.

Eren joins the Scouts.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to this UNFINISHED work that I've decided to post UNFINISHED...

Tbh there isn't really a set plot, at first a lot of it's just world-building and then it becomes more aligned with the actual canon plot. I'm really tired, i have to wake up in 5 hours, sorry for lack of notes :(

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

'We're not harbouring a kidnapped child.'

Levi grips the wood beneath his palm, grimacing at the way it's rough surface digs into his skin, teasing a splinter on his fingertips. The night is dark with splattered stars and dimmed moonlight, enough to harshen the shadows on the other's face, on the child in his arms.

Shadis exclaims, clutching the sleeping boy tighter to his chest. 'Please!— His father is gone, and he watched his mother die in front of him in Shiganshina. This kid—' The kid whose head rolls backwards with each frantic movement, hair drifting off his face and dripping down, reaching for the ground. Levi watches those chapped lips part, the beads of drool gathering on the corners of his lips. Faint red marks line the bottom of his eyes, like the marks of a warrior sent to a fruitless war, but Levi chalks it up to exhaustion, and the late night sky. His eyebrows begin to twitch— The Captain's seen it enough in his men to recognise a nightmare. 'This kid, he's the last thing left of his family. Another bloodline will die out, and no-one will remember them.'

Levi tuts, glancing away. Erwin stands further inside the headquarter, tea in hand, slowly cooling. There's an underlying need for orders in their eye contact. All his Commander does is quirk a brow, closing his eyes. The answer lies at Levi's call and beckon. 'I don't care.'

There have been hundreds of bloodlines wiped out recently. If anything, he's lucky to have survived; we home him, we home all the other poor bastards out there.' Turning back to Shadis, Levi cocks a brow. 'Where did you get him, anyway? Don't tell me you snuck into the refugee warehouses. You would've moved him from a shithole to a hellhole.'

Affronted, Shadis glances down to the kid, expression tense. 'No, I—' Chewing the bottom of his lip, he shifts his hands to support the back of his head, fingers gently carding through his hair. There's something so intimately paternal about the look in his eyes, one that hesitates the refusal on Levi's tongue. The kid's taut eyebrows soften, his lashes fluttering, though he remains steadily asleep. Levi tries to ignore the drool leaking down his cheek.

'He was in the middle of Wall Rose, just on the ground. I recognised him, and I know he's alone.' With a grim look, he frowns. 'We came across the remains of his crushed home and his mother's shoes.' Looking past Levi, Shadis glares into the darkness of the headquarters, expression pleading. 'Erwin. We rode alongside one another. I've dedicated my heart countless times, no matter how ruined it's become. You know I would do anything for my people. So please—'

Erwin raises an eyebrow, nonspeaking. Shadis tilts his head down to the kid, resting it on his fragile chest, as if pressing too hard, baring full weight upon thin ribs would break them like porcelain. He treats the kid like a god on a pedestal, a god whose story is too pitiful not to turn a blind eye to. 'Let me be selfish, just this once!'

Levi scoffs, stepping back. Shadis steps forward to enter, but a solid hand pushes him backwards, gentle enough to keep the child asleep. Levi knows the kid probably needs the rest, if his story is true. Though, saying no comes out no easier. 'Go home, Shadis. Take care of the kid. He'll live an easier life with you, than with us.'

'Hold on.' Eyes turn to the blond.

Wood scrapes against cobblestone as Erwin gets up to his feet, his footsteps cracks against silent glass as he crosses the hall, moving to the door. Levi steps out of the way and releases the door for Erwin to stand fully, scrutinising the child, eyes roaming over every dirtied inch of the kid. Shadis continues rubbing his fingers through youthful hair, never once losing eye contact with Erwin, who hadn't done him the same favour.

'Who is this child?'

'One of the orphans, from Shiganshina—'

'No.' Erwin slaps a hand down on Shadis' shoulder, brows furrowing. 'Who is this child to,' His shadow cascades over the child's face in the moonlight, 'you?'

To that, Shadis hesitates. He looks to Erwin, then back down to the kid. His expression quivers as he runs a loving finger down the tan skin beneath traumatised eyes, his touch gentle enough to ease the furrowing eyebrows, gentle enough to ignore the fading marks—They're dents, creases along soft skin from a deep sleep. Erwin outstretches his hands, but Shadis is not ready to let go, shame creeping up his throat as it pushes the words out.

'He's the last thing left of the woman I loved.'

Erwin nods, soft with an affirming huff, taking the child from his arms. Shadis feels impossibly light, his arms lacking weight in all the wrong ways. He watches Erwin replace his hand on the kid's head, pressing it to his cloak. Sleepily, a dreamlike naivety prompts the boy to grab onto the forest green, holding it like he would his mother's hair. His hands are filthy and they shake with exertion, frail and underfed. Shadis watches that same affection cast over Erwin's eyes, slithering between the cracks of his mask before clicking into place.

'We'll keep him. As long as he needs to be dependant on someone, we'll keep him here.' Erwin turns to Levi, who stares at him like he'd grown another limb, lips parted. Yet, undying and unquestioning trust forever being his drive, he doesn't make a breath's of retreat when Erwin hands him the kid, already half-way dwarfed alone. Shadis would smile, sincere, if he hadn't been watching the kid being taken, a kid that, in his eyes and his eyes only, had been his own.

Erwin nods to the child. 'Levi, take the boy—'

'Eren.'

The commander hums, questioning. Shadis clutches the key in his hand, thumb tracing the handle's patterning. It takes weeks of energy to keep from his voice breaking into shards of glass, but he manages, shoving word bile out to be decoded. Levi rolls his eyes, stepping away. His grip is not as comforting as the other two's, but it holds the sturdiness and protection of a distant parent praising their child. Shadis watches him disappear into the darkness, Carla's name on the tip of his tongue that slips out as,

'His name is Eren Jaeger.'

'Eren Jaeger, hm?' Hange rubs their chin thoughtfully, watching the boy toss and turn on the barrack's rough sheets. Whimpers slip through his dehydrated lips, his eyes tearing up at the corners as he shivers all over. It's definitely not a fever, they had made sure to check that when Levi walked in with a random child. Just terrors.

'Yeah,' Levi mutters, stepping over and, as he had seen Erwin doing, carding his hand through Eren's hair— The effect is immediate, and Levi wonders if it was always that easy to calm a child down. He wouldn't know. 'Keith Shadis said he was in the middle of the plains of Wall Rose, unconscious. Didn't trust anyone but us to take care of him, so now we have to deal with him until he's old enough to live on his own.'

Petra frowns, anxiously fiddling with her own bed's sheets as she stares at the kid. 'We.. We can't take care of a little boy like him. He's growing, he needs attention and education and a proper childhood.'

'He looks about ten years old,' Hange comments, getting up and moving past Levi to roll the kid onto his back, waving Levi's hand away. Levi tuts, pulling out his handkerchief to wipe his hands down. 'He's past his formative years, so we don't have to worry about teaching him how to be social with people.' Looking up at Levi, Hange continues, 'the only issue I see now is we have to think about how to manage him, like Petra said.'

Gunther speaks up from the crowd. 'I can help teach him. If we go on expeditions to familiar places, me and Eld are constantly with the supply wagons— We can take that time to teach him if the ride is slow.' Eld hums, nodding along in agreement. 'Ah.. But about knowing how to keep clean and all...'

Levi stares down at the kid. He's long since gone still, facing away from everyone, his hands tucked under his body and his legs curled up beneath him. 'I will deal with that. If the brat is going to learn how to clean, he'll learn my way. You fools couldn't clean if it meant saving your lives.'

Oluo frowns, waving his hand dismissively. 'Heichou, you manage to clean the dust before it even lands on anything, of course we can't compare to the devil you become when you— *Hrnnk—!*' Petra gives him a knowing look, shaking her head while offering him a tissue to soak up the blood.

The door creaks open, and soldiers shuffle to their feet. A chorused shout leaps through the air, the kid jostling for a moment. Erwin holds his hand up, easing the soldiers— His attention is turned to the child laying in bed, his eyes narrowing for a moment, eerily silent. This judgement hangs over the air like a swaying vine, loose and gentle, before Erwin lets out a long breath through his nose. 'Eren. You can sit up now. It'll be easier to understand everything going on if you could ask questions with freedom.'

Eyes turn to the bed. The gentle sniffing and the soft whimpering comes back full force, this time in cohesion, frail arms and legs turning to sit up, legs hanging off the edge of the bed. Hange steps back, incredulous as they chuckle for a moment. His clothes are askew on his body, malnourishment making them ill fitting, but he doesn't seem to care. There are smudges of dirt and grime all along his skin, that of which is revealed, and he smells of fertiliser— Erwin frowns. Children forced to work gruelling hours in order to live for the wealthy who know nothing of hardship. It's unfair, unjust, and disgusting. His eyes are a reverent viridian, shimmering with tears, confusion writhing in the depths of the emerald.

It's undeniable, Erwin thinks. This child stands unique from the others. There's something about him that Erwin can't pinpoint, something he plans to cut out and observe, like cradling a thrumming heart in his bloody hands. The essence of life in his crimson palms.

Eren wipes a tear with his sleeve, keeping his eyes cast down to the floor, his shoulders trembling. He speaks hoarse, quiet and small, a flame abused down into nothing more than a comforting heat. 'I'm— I'm sorry..'

Levi looks more and more uncomfortable with each second that passes. No doubt Eren reminds him of his childhood, in the state he's in— How the contagion of the Underground breaking through crevices of poverty to spread to the sky.

'You have nothing to apologise for. You've woken up in a new place with strangers talking about you,' Erwin placates, kneeling down in front of the kid. 'You were very smart to feign sleep. My name is Commander Erwin Smith. Are you hurt anywhere that Hange should know about? They're the one who checked to see if you had a fever.'

Eren hesitates, glancing down at his sleeve. He shakes his head, but does not protest as Erwin grabs his arm, peeling back the ragged jacket sleeve, thumb running down the inside of his arm. Nothing's there, but the kid shivers as Erwin drifts over a vein at the crook of his elbow. There's a faint blueness to the skin, hovering just beneath thin veins, a splotch that stands out if Erwin looks too long. While it's clearly a cause for concern, they have more pressing matters. They need to calm the child before he loses what little composure he seems to be grasping onto. Erwin steps back, sitting at the bed opposite Eren's.

Levi clicks his tongue, crossing his arms as he leans on the post beside Erwin. Eren looks over at him, and for a moment, something breaks past his fear and spreads through his face, visibly brightening his expression. Levi remembers that expression, he remembers it well and almost irritatingly fondly. Not only is it the foolish kid admiring the wrong people, it's the selfless fool who tried to liberate a fallen bird from the Underground. It's the expression that lights up the sky and pushes the sun to rise each morning, that darkens the world when it falls.

His mind begins to fog with mist and shaky, bloody hands. The memory makes him nauseous. Levi glances away, unable to meet the kid's eyes. In his peripheral, the brown hair almost looks ginger if he tries hard enough to see it. Eren's expression was not unnoticed by solely Levi. Hange steps forward, eyes wide and passionate as they shake Eren's hand, a bit too aggressively for someone as malnourished as he looks. Eren flails with each rise and fall of his hand, look equally as if not a little less passionate about meeting Hange.

'Ohh, you're the kid! I remember you! You looked at Levi over there with so much love and admiration, then Levi had to be all mean and not even acknowledge you!' Kneeling and letting go of his hand, Hange ruffles Eren's hair. Moblit takes a half-hearted step forward, before sighing. The kid startles at the gentle contact, oddly, head ducking despite Hange's refusal to move away. 'You're cuter up close!'

Eren manages a weak smile, shoving Hange's hand off his head. 'I..'. He looks down to his lap, clenching his fists as he glares down at himself. 'I was dumb and stupid then.' Something fades in his expression, dimming his eyes. 'I ran off to see you guys before you left for your adventure, but I should've been going home with...'

Hange jumps back when Eren gasps, loud and sudden. 'Mikasa! Armin!' Glancing around, Eren pushes himself off the bed and stumbles past Hange, past the crowd of Levi Squad staring down at him with their own bewildered expressions. His movements are uncoordinated and groggy, laced with exhaustion. Urgency pushes his body to look up and down at each bed, tripping over his own feet, tired and numb. 'Where are they?'

'Mikasa and Armin,' Erwin echoes, tapping his bottom lip. When Eren passes by him to check the other side of the barracks, closer to the door out, he grabs Eren's shoulder. The action startles Eren, who falls backwards and into Hange's arm. Hange gently nudges him to stand back up. 'Who are they, Eren?'

'My friends!' And much to everyone's dread, tears begin to sprout in Eren's eyes, panic convulsing through his body like an unstoppable infection, possessing his muscle. They can hear his composure snapping like a string pulled taut. Breaths are drawn— A hysterical child is often an inconsolable one. 'I was with them! I was supposed to find food for them when I woke up—' His face falls, and the first tear begins to stream down his cheek. '..In the morning... How long has it been? How long have I been here?'

Everyone exchanges uncomfortable glances, but Erwin, forever the collected commander, sighs, looking down to the floor. 'Ah.. I know who you're talking about. Mikasa and Armin, the two children you were with. They were with you when you fled Shiganshina, were they?' Eren nods, feverish, his hands flying to clench at the hem of his ratty cardigan. He grips it so tightly, overcompensating for such a thin fabric, his knuckles turn white and begin to shake. The fabric begins to weep, much to his surprise, his fingers releasing the brown. Compensating, long, filthy nails begin to scratch at his nape, the crook of his elbow. His breathing picks up. Eyes turn to the commander, questioning. Levi bites the inside of his lip, confused yet silent.

'They're the only family I have left..!' Eren sobs, a fat glob of tears hitting his shirt and pressing into his skin. 'I was meant to get them food, and I don't know how long it's been, and I wanna go see them—'

'It's been three weeks.'

The tense thickness in the room becomes unbreathable. Gunther and Eld look down to the floor, Petra fiddling with the thread of her sheets. Hange, Levi, and Erwin are left to see the child's expression, the sudden dread that crosses his face and slams into the forefront of his brain like bags of sand atop growing trees. His hands fall from reddened skin, limp at his sides. Suffocating them beneath thin fabric and grains that fill every pore. His eyes widen and his lips part as if to scream, but nothing comes out other than the beginnings to questions everyone thought they could answer. Tears begin streaming down his face, and if Levi has to imagine, his expression mirrors the one he wore when he watched his mother die.

Levi thinks, for just a moment, to mutter some assurance, to sew some doubt into the kid's head. His loyalty trumps his humanity. *He* says nothing aloud, his thoughts trapped in his head, alongside long-expired guilt nestled there, a sopping blister of pus.

'The man who dropped you here,' Erwin continues, unwavering, 'said that you were unconscious next to the bodies of your friends. Someone tried to rob you in the midst of the night, and they killed the people who woke up.'

There's something inherently wrong about this situation. Levi's emotions scream at him to say something, *anything*, just the slightest hint for the kid not to believe him, but the soldier in him has long since embedded itself around Levi, a protective cloak unlike the camouflage they wear.

Eren lets out a faint noise. 'I.. I was the only one who didn't wake up?'

Erwin nods. 'They sacrificed their lives for you, Eren. Let us protect those lives, so you, and they, won't die in vain.' Holding his hand out, Erwin waits, palm upturned. Eren blearily

looks at it, his body shaking all over, blinking rapidly, clearing each tear out like garbage tossed on the street. He puts his own hand in it, watching as Erwin wraps his hand around his. 'Here's my offer, Eren. You live with us, train with us, become one of our own. You'll be fed, clothed, bathed, and educated, and we'll treat you like our own soldier until you're old enough to go off alone.'

The illusion of choice. Levi steels his gaze, trying to ignore the blister festering.

His eyebrows twitch upwards as the kid stares down at the hand, then sniffs once. 'Armin... Mikasa..' Eren's expression falls abruptly blank, similar to how a soldier would stifle his emotions in front of a fallen friend. His tears dry like matte stripes on his cheeks, no longer existent. Brows draw close together like a string pulling taut on thick fabric, and his other hand clenches into a tight fist, so tight his nails dig into his palm. Then he looks up, directly into Erwin's eyes.

That was the first time Levi learned something very important about Eren Jaeger.

His expression was set into a hard look of something between anger and determination. The two tread such a fine line, with Eren, that Levi could never tell which of the two he felt. With the way Eren's eyes shine, exhausted but ever a vibrant emerald, the line may not have existed at all for him. His anger blinded him in the same way determination blinds the dying, and his determination fuelled him in the same way fury powers the prolonging of justice. It was at that moment in time Levi supposed he was an enigma more than he was a regular child. He found determination in anger, and anger in determination.

His voice is lower, a deeper gravel within him that has eyebrows flying upwards. Grief laces his throat like a hand wrapped around his neck, desperate to stop his heart. 'And if I say no, and go back to the inside?'

'You suffer even more, then you die. That is, if you make it inside at all.' Erwin releases Eren's hand, shuffling forward to place his on the small of Eren's back, fingers running over each vertebrae like the world's last hope for music. 'Come on. You're tired, and you do not have to make your decision tonight. Sleep, and choose in the morning.'

The anger fades from his expression, and Eren just cries. His lips quiver helplessly as Eren crawls back onto the bed, glancing warily at the squad staring back at him with unique looks of guilt. Miche steps over and slips off his boots as he sleeps on the bed in front of Eren, the two never leaving each other's sights. Erwin, decidedly satisfied, ushers them all out of the barracks, and closes the door, shrouding Eren in darkness. The squad is silent, as if harbouring the quiet of a dead comrade, holding their peace until they all descend the stairs, away from the barracks, and to the kitchen. Moblit and Petra split off to prepare tea as the rest sit down. A few minutes pass by, the quietude begging to be filled with the familiarity of chatter. Finally,

'What the hell, Erwin?' Levi crosses a leg over the other and gnaws his tongue as he seethes, eyes never leaving those sapphire crystals. A resigned bite claws at the edge of his words as Levi pinches his eyebrows together, fighting a headache. 'What the *hell*?'

'Commander— You didn't tell us his friends *died*,' Eld mumbles, keeping his voice low. 'Why would you tell him so abruptly?' Chewing his bottom lip, ever the empath, Eld shudders. 'We don't even tell family of fallen soldier so crudely.' Erwin shakes his head, slipping off his coat and hanging it on the back of his chair.

'Who gives a damn if he leaves?' Oluo snaps, sitting up in his chair. Levi glares at him, pushing him back down into his seat with his eyes. His tone is then subdued, irritation unfaltering— It's evident lying to the boy has had its effects on him, even despite his insistence on apathy. 'He's a street urchin we don't know. Sure he went through all that stuff, it's shitty, but what makes him so special that he oughta stay with us? I respect his positioning, I respect his leadership, but Captain Shadis has no rule over us. You do, Commander.'

Erwin narrows his eyes, the mention of the ex-commander drawing his focus. He turns to Levi with a furrowed brow as he murmurs, 'Shadis' story was logical. He was in love with a woman who married another man and had a child. Eren is the last semblance of that love he had, and he can't let go. It could even be possible that Eren is his own, which realistically makes even more sense. What he told us, I have no doubt, is partial truth.' Rubbing his chin, Erwin averts his eyes to the table. 'Though, with the added information from Eren, the story isn't adding up. One of the two is lying, and I don't hold it beneath Shadis, if it means getting what he wants.

'Even if it is lying by omission, something is untrue. A lone child can't end up in Wall Rose out of nowhere, not with the security on the gates nowadays; that's the first thing I noticed at all, though at the time he said it, I only had a strange feeling that it didn't make sense. Going by what I've gathered from the child, however, Eren fell asleep beside his friends in Trost, where all the refugees are. The fact that Shadis took him in his sleep and brought him to us is far more discernible than Eren just being in the woods.'

'So he did kidnap him,' Levi mutters, his fist clenching as he crosses his arms.

Frowning, Erwin drums his fingers along the table. 'It's too late to take him back. The guards will question where he'd come from, and that will put the Scouts in a tight spot. The Survey Corps are already on thin ice, given the attack on Shiganshina— Top Brass says we should've seen it coming. Thus, we must keep the boy; even if there is nothing remarkable about Eren Jaeger, it'll prove useful to have a soldier raised by strictly the best of the best. He will be a lasting and beneficial asset to us.'

A clatter sounds from the kitchen, followed by Petra's startled yelp. Levi sighs, shaking his head. His chair scrapes its nails along the floor as he gets to his feet, abandoning the table. 'What the hell are they doing in there..?' He looks over into a shadowy corner, his voice soft as he peers at the corner. It's unmoving, yet chills run up and down his spine as he promises he sees the ghost of those teal eyes staring back at him. 'Actually. I'm... going to bed. Make sure you clean the table before I wake up.'

He walks off, leaving the rest sat and tight-lipped. Petra and Moblit walk back out with a collection of cups in a tray each. Moblit glances at the empty chair, then at Hange, who shrugs. Levi wasn't one to sleep before anyone else— or, much like Hange, at all—, but tonight had been a complete wrench in their routine, stacked atop the fall of their walls and

sentient titans. Now they had to take care of a child, a child who believed his friends were dead, a child who had nothing but them, they who did not want him.

Silence passes like gusts of gentle wind rushing through their ears. No-one speaks, not even Erwin, who savours his tea in peace. No-one moves too loud, too significantly, for no-one wants to draw eyes to themselves. There'd be an obligation to speak out, luring eyes, to voice an opinion only hushed whispers would agree with. They all knew only snakes spoke with quiet tongue; none wanted to be the one bitten.

Oluo raises the cup above his head and empties it in his mouth, slamming it on the table with enough force the other cups rattle. 'Damnit..!' He stares down at his empty mug, scowling. His chair topples back across a few stones as he gets to his feet, eyes cast to the floor. 'I'm getting some water.'

No-one says a word, watching him as he leaves, with no further comment.

The kitchen is a dark place illuminated with few candles. It's clean as is the rest of the headquarters, but there's something unsettling in it's dark corners and hiding spots. No-one particularly enjoys being in here. Not even those who could navigate the room with shut eyes. Oluo shuffles through the herbs and meat—That which he eyes longingly— and bread on the counter before grabbing a pouch, the fabric sloshing as he raises the nozzle up to his eye, peering inside. It's water alright. He's not entirely sure why he'd checked— It wouldn't be anything else, Hange isn't allowed in the kitchen anymore.

'Ehm..'

Oluo curses, biting down on his tongue as he swivels around, placing his back on the counter. Cradling his leaking mouth, he sneers down at the offender, voice timid and quiet, eyes widened. The kid looks like a lost little fawn, ears swivelling all around, processing everything yet understanding none of it. He was small sitting on the bed, and he's even smaller now, his shoulders hunched and cheeks reddened with dried tears. Oluo sighs, taking a swig from the pouch. 'What's up, kid?'

Eren startles, hands behind his back, as if he hadn't been expecting to be acknowledged by Oluo, falling into a clumsy salute. Good. Kid should know his place, and who to respect. If Oluo's lucky, he'll seem cool enough for the kid to begin taking after him. They'd call the kid Mini-Oluo. Oluo Junior. He smirks at the thought, broken from his fantasies as Eren speaks. His hands remain behind his back, though through the way he switches and shifts his weight, he wants to move them all around, releasing his nerves. 'I was— I'm sorry for leaving the room, I was just really thirsty. I haven't drunken and eaten anything in three whole weeks.'

There's a certain emphasis on *three whole weeks* that has Oluo gazing at Eren from the corner of his eye, before shrugging. 'Sure. Let me just grab a cup.'

Oluo reaches past more herbs and food to search for some sort of container Eren could drink from, muttering to himself about Levi and the cleanliness. Eren doesn't say a word, shuffling around. Oluo can't help but feel bad for the kid— Lost his home, his parents, his everything, and now he's in some castle in who-knows-where for him, with a bunch of adults he knows nothing more of than that they're all suicidal idiots who've lost more than learned. Eren, as far

as Oluo knows, is a timid, pragmatic kid with a burst of energy for the people he cares about. It reminds him of Captain, in a way, with his silent yet deadly persona, softening only moderately for his crew.

Something stings Oluo in the spine, and he freezes all over.

'Put your hands in the air and turn around.'

For a moment Oluo's sure they'd been invaded by some thug looking to steal things, but the tiny hand grabbing his jacket and prodding him to turn around throws him for a complete loop. He keeps his hands by his shoulders as he faces Eren, eyes widening. Eren stares up at him, nothing timid in those viridian eyes, however everything pragmatic, cold and calculating. They're a dim, calculating gaze that flickers the Captain's in Oluo's sight for a moment— He'd never been on the receiving end before. In the boy's hand, a silver gleam and steady hand, comfortable and intimate with the handle. It's not his first time with a knife, and he makes it known louder than any child should.

Hesitating, Oluo speaks out, fearing that if he breathes too deeply, he'll plunge himself on the knife. 'What— What're you doing, kiddo?'

'I heard everything.' Eren scowls, fingers clenching around the knife. 'I wasn't in the middle of nowhere, I was with my friends. They're alive, and I'm going to get back to them.'

'You'll die if you try to sneak into Trost alone,' Oluo cautions, unable to tell if he should speak too loud. Eren glares, clicking his tongue as he gently nudges Oluo to the door. There is reason to the soldier's argument, they both know that, but Eren's anger prevails his logic.

All the nuances that had formed the half-complete puzzle of Eren begin to shift together as Oluo stares down at the kid. The pretend-sleeping, gathering information, the emotion switching, the quiet footsteps, disarming voice, innocent request. Eren's no unfamiliar client to the game of life, death, and how confidently he should roll the dice to dance along it's line.

Light brightens in Oluo's eyes as he steps out of the kitchen, catching the curious looks of his comrades. Curiosity morphs into worry at the expression on Oluo's face, before they swap into looks of horror, quiet footsteps trailing after. Gunther leaps out of his seat, and only stops halfway across the table at the pained grunt Oluo lets out, warmth trickling down his back. From the way its heat melts all over his body, Oluo relieves the thought that it's anything but sweat.

'No-one move,' the child says, his voice dead and calm, the tone of a predator with years of practice, 'I don't want to hurt you. I just want to go back to my family.'

Erwin frowns, his posture rigid. 'Eren, they're—'

'Alive. Because you didn't know I had any left until I said so.' Something flickers in Erwin's expression, one of panic, but it smooths out into authority. Eren nudges Oluo further past the table, never taking their eyes off of anyone for a second. It feels even the air in the room has gone stagnant. 'I'm going to leave, and no-one is going to follow me. Please.'

'You don't even know where you are,' Eld supplies, rising to his feet. 'If you want to leave so desperately, you could have asked us, and we would have helped you.'

Eren scowls, pushing Oluo further with the knife until they make it to the door, leading to the courtyard. Oluo casts a panicked glance to Erwin, whose jaw tightens, neck stiff as he nods. Oluo peers over his shoulder to Eren, whose eyebrows dip when they meet his eyes, teeth baring. Swallowing, Oluo reaches for the courtyard doors, fingers trembling on metal handles as he pulls them open.

He doesn't even get a good look at Levi's face.

The man is sidestepping him before the doors even fully open and wrestling the knife out of Eren's hand. Eren collapses over onto the floor, his noise breaking the glass of silence keeping them paralysed, knife flying off to the side. Oluo backs away, tumbling over himself and onto a chair at the table, clutching his head. Levi squad all get to their feet to observe better. Realising his situation, the kid moves to his hands and knees, crawling towards the knife with reckless abandon. A bird, held down to the floor with its cage door wide open. Levi lunges forward, knee jutting out and smashing those fragile ribs into the concrete, holding him still. Eren screams, yet pushes through, rising to his elbows with a scowl as he reaches for the knife, hand trembling. Levi grabs the outstretched arm, and with a similar determined look in his eye, braces Eren's bicep on the floor.

A crack shatters out through the room.

'Heichou!—' Petra screams out, drowned out by the wailing of the child, his legs kicking and flailing under the weight of Levi.

The broken arm collapses to the floor, bent backwards, and Levi wastes no more than another moment, grabbing Eren's hair, raising it up from the floor. He's undeterred by the crying, the snot and tears and swear pouring off the kid with a flush of adrenaline on his cheeks. Undeterred by his comrade's calls, for they're all a distant ringing compared to his own anger, he shakes the boy's head, his hand quaking.

'I knew something was up with you,' Levi scowls, pushing the head down to the stone, relishing in the crack that sounds, the screaming, the crying. It's ambience he's familiar with, ambience he slept to as a child. 'I knew you accepted it too easily.' Raising the head again, Levi catches a faint glimpse of the ivory of a bone, the boy's nose bloody and disfigured, crunched within itself.

'You come into my headquarters. Threaten one of my men. And now you want to leave, without thinking you'll have consequences? Huh?' Grabbing his other, unbroken arm, Levi glares at the boy, yet resigns as he's pried off of him. Hange dives in to help, bringing him to his haunches, but the boy is caked with blood, tears, sweat. His broken arm hangs at his side loosely, and it would have been two if Levi was given a few more seconds.

A broken arm at this point in history for a boy like him was as good as being dead. Worse. At least a corpse wasn't a mouth that needed feeding. Levi can't bring himself to feel remorse.

'I want to go home!' Eren sobs, dam finally broken through, flooding dry towns with water. 'I want to see my friends again! I don't care if I suffer, I want to be with them! I want Mikasa, Armin!'

Hange pats their body around for their medical case, pulling out their gauze and holding it out to wrap the boy's face with, considerably banged up. Levi glowers at Gunther and Petra keeping him in his seat, Erwin watching the situation unfold with a disturbing interest. Quiet once more fills the room, heat like steam dripping sweat down Levi's forehead.

Hange has not yet wrapped the boy in gauze. They hesitate, bandage held out, but instead they turn to Erwin, expression a mix of awe and fear. 'Commander. Look.'

'Yes, Levi did do a severe number on him,' Erwin snarks, trailing off with rapid succession as Hange angles to move away from the boy.

His eyes droop with fatigue, steam rising from his face like an extinguished fire. Eyes widen and jaws drop as the boy sways in his spot, eyelids fluttering before falling shut, collapsing on his folded arms.

His *healed* arms.

Hange tentatively approaches the boy once more, nudging his face with their finger to double check slumber. He's a breathing corpse, awaiting desecration. They then roll the boy onto his back, protruding spine digging bruises into his skin, gently poking at his nose, that too actively healing itself. Fibres sew back into place and bone corrects itself without the need for any help at all, something that has hearts plummeting past the deepest part of the Earth. The bravest rebellion against nature, the inability to suffer.

'The hell..?' Oluo mumbles, eyes wide. 'Why— His arm! His nose!' He gestures to the healed body, tone bewildered. A certain hysteria rocks the way he laughs.

'He heals like a Titan,' Petra whispers, increasingly anxious, fumbling with the frays of her clothes. 'How's that possible, though? It shouldn't be.' She looks down, chewing her nail. 'We watched Heichou snap his arm in half...'

'That explains why Shadis came to us,' Erwin trails off, rubbing his chin. Stepping and kneeling down in front of the child, Erwin grabs his hair, raising him to his eye level, staring deep into sleeping eyes, as if searching for an answer within them. 'Take him down to the basement, and chain him up. I'm not sure even *he* knows what he is.'

Eren's hand aches in his father's hold.

Being awoken in the middle of the night in Trost to a familiar face was enough to move Eren into tears, but confusion has long since dried them. His father, quiet and antsy, stole his hand

away and led him out of Trost, the two avoiding guards and sneaking into the woods. He didn't say a word. Didn't tell Eren to get what little belongings they had left. Didn't give a single glance to Mikasa, or Armin, who both slept so soundly by Eren.

His shoes scuff and catch onto small rocks as his father drags him along a dirt road, enclosed by tall trees. Eren glances out into the foliage, wondering what animals watched them as they travelled. Were they as curious, puzzled, as Eren was? The night wind kisses gentle warmth onto his face, but he cannot find comfort in it, not with how his father is acting.

'Dad..' Eren squirms, slipping out of his father's grip. His father takes a couple steps, stopping completely. The trees form a circle around them, giving them space, trapping them in the maw of the forest. 'What's happening? Where are we going? We forgot to bring Mikasa, and Armin.'

Rubbing his eye, Eren yawns, exhaustion overtaking his paranoia. 'I need to help them work tomorrow, so they can get food.. Or are you going to help us?' He lights up, the thought of getting out of the hellhole of Trost refugee programs sparking energy within him. 'Are you going to keep us safe?'

The smile on his face drops with his father turns around.

Tears leak down his father's face like streams of spring water, rounding down his chin and dripping onto his shirt, soaking in the dark fabric. He has something else in his other hand, a needle, filled with some kind of translucent liquid, enough to immediately set alarm bells ringing in Eren's head. He'd never seen his father so emotional— He'd always been stoic, a calm security but never stern—, and the sight of his bloodshot eyes and marred stress etched in his face makes Eren come to tears as well. Something primal in Eren tells him he needs to flee, turn around and scream to nature for help as he runs. A deer fleeing a lone wolf in unfamiliar habitat. It's the same animalism clutching the knife in his hands that would save Mikasa's life.

'What's going on..?'

'Eren.' It's the first word he's spoken to him since he came back. The sound of his name from a familiar adult should comfort him, even if only by a little bit. All it does is send a flurry of chills up his back. 'Eren, listen to me, okay?' Turning, the glint of metal in his hand, he drops to Eren's height, hands on his shoulders. Eren swallows, stepping back, trapped. 'I'm going to help you. I'm going to give you a way to survive— You just need to trust me. Do you trust me, son?'

'Dad—' Eren stops, eyeing the needle hung in the air on his shoulder. A sweat breaks out on his skin, his voice wavering. 'What are you doing? You need to help us— You can't just— Just...'

Hands trail down to his arm, shaky and uncoordinated fingers pulling back his sleeve. Eren physically jumps back, tugging his arm away, his father releasing with such a force he falls back onto the dirt, crawling back on his hands. His father sobs, wiping his eyes with his arm. 'Eren..! You can save everyone, Mikasa, Armin, *everyone*.'

A hand returns, sturdier and more aggressive than before, nails pressing deep into Eren's arm. Eren weeps, for this man can't be his father, this unstable, sobbing man apologising while holding a syringe to his arm. He weeps, because he is afraid, and the one last rock keeping him clung to the steep cliff of all he knew is breaking apart beneath his fingers, dropping him further and further down into delirium.

'I'm sorry,' he sobs, 'but you mustn't— Don't join the Scouts. You told me not to let you join the Scouts. You must do everything to avoid it. You need to avenge your mother, Eren. You need to avenge her and save us all.'

'You must.'

The needle sinks in. Eren seizes, the stinging pain of alien serum sinking into his blood. Thoughts rush into his head and block themselves from the forefront of his mind in seconds, answers to questions he'll never know flooding his brain and numbing all sense of naivety. What a lovely thing, to be naive.

He opens his mouth, and screams.

'Oi. Brat.'

Water splashes down on his face, shooting him straight up like rigour mortis overtaking a corpse left to die. His vocal chords grovel with pain. The dim lighting of candles feel like raw flames shooting into his eyes, something he squints to as he wipes his face down with a damp sleeve. Chains weigh his wrists down, deepening his panic into a primal part of his mind that he tries his best to ignore. It's hard to tell on his body what is sweat or water. His arm no longer hurts, and the myriad of agony on his face has long since faded into a phantom. Metal clangs to an unforgiving floor as the black-haired man throws a bucket aside, staring down at Eren like the filth of his shoe. He remembers the doctor called him *Levi*. Eren glares back up at him. He hates being stared at like that.

Yet Levi observes him, expression unchanging, as one would a wild animal, his movements robotic and silent as he sits on the bed opposite Eren, regal and elegant in all the delinquent manners of the word. 'Do you know what you did to my men?'

'Send me home.'

The man clicks his tongue, eyebrows dipping into a glower. He repeats himself through gritted teeth, slower, trying to communicate with a feral dog, a house pet falling back into its nature. That is inherently what it means to be human, to be civilised but to bite, scratch, and snarl the moment safety falls away. '*Do you know what you did?*'

The boy kicks his leg out, pathetically nudging Levi's thigh. His eyes never dim in his anger, not even in his fear as he keeps his focus locked on the captain. 'I tried to get rid of another power-hungry pig from this world, and I wish I did it.'

Eren regrets for only a moment as the man sits up, his hand balled into a fist. This was another thing Levi learned about Eren— The boy did not regret aloud. He mourned, he agonised, and he bottled all his regret into a compact chamber, letting everything combust

into a flurry of rage and violence. Other times, it stewed, festered, a thick and gloomy sludge that clogged his pores and his throat until he had no choice but to let it drip down unwarranted. Eren regretted, like any other human on Earth, but never with the collective. Always in his own privacy.

The boy had been punched many times in his life, but from this man, from the man he'd admired so much, he braces for an explosion of pain. It never comes. He peers out of one of his scrunched eyes to see a hand wrapped on the other's shoulder, where Erwin Smith comes into view, his expression placated, calm and collected in a way that juxtaposes the calculating and tense expression he held when Eren initially woke up.

'I hope you don't mind the restraints, Eren.' Erwin stands beside Levi, and pulls out a handkerchief from his pocket. He reaches forth, and with care, wipes a sheen of sweat from Eren's forehead. The action is so reminiscent of his mother that Eren almost wants to melt into the hand, even just for a trace of the woman he held so close. 'It's a precaution, to ensure you don't do something as reckless as you did before.'

Eren tuts, looking away. He manages to hold his rebellion for no more than a moment, his anger swelling into rage as a hand locks in his hair, forcing him to turn back around. Levi scowls. 'You face the Commander and reply when he speaks to you, you rat.'

'Levi,' Erwin eases, 'he's young, a fool, and afraid.'

'I've seen rabid mutts with better manners,' Levi snarls as he tosses Eren's head back. If he relished in the way Eren's skull smacked on the wall behind him, he made no indication that he did. 'You better treat us with some damn respect. We're the only people in the world who wouldn't kill you with what you've done.'

Eren growls, his fists clenching. His attention drags to his arm, his anger shifting to a bout of confusion. He'd heard the Scouts had gotten humanity's best resources, but he hadn't known they had a tonic to cure broken bones. The kid shudders at the memory, the raw panic masking the pain and sound of his arm breaking into two. Just to check it was his hand, he opens and closes his fist a few times, the action fatiguing his fingers.

His confusion must have been obvious on his face. Erwin hums. 'It's true that we have spoken lies to you upon your arrival, Eren. However, it is not a lie when we tell you the only reason you aren't dead is because you're an entirely new enigma.'

The kid ignores him for a moment, before he flinches at the hand raising to his head in his peripheral. He turns back to Erwin, tamed, and nods minutely, swallowing as Levi lowers his hand. Erwin smiles, patting Eren's knee twice.

'Do you remember what happened last night?' To this, Eren hums, nodding once more as he purses his lips, the action reminding him just how chapped his lips are, how thirsty he is. He hasn't eaten for what feels like days, but oddly enough, he's not as hungry as he is thirsty. 'What happened, Eren?'

'I.. I got up from the bed and told the man I needed water.' This part of his story, at the very least, wasn't a lie. He had truly been thirsty, and the change of plans had only come when he

overheard the Scouts. No doubt, if Mikasa and Armin were with him, they would've made sure they were all adequately *able* to run before actually attempting. Eren had always thought of those after the fact. It's why he always got punched to the ground so often.

His voice is hoarse as he speaks— in his mind, Eren realises the only reason Levi had woken him up was because of his screams. 'And I snuck downstairs.. and tried to leave. Then you hurt me.' He looks to the Captain at this, and tries to mask his anger as Levi clicks his tongue.

Erwin, however, nods again. 'That is correct. I won't sugarcoat it because you're a child, Eren — You took one of my soldiers hostage and tried to attack him when things didn't go your way. Captain Levi here disarmed you, breaking your right arm, your nose, and inducing a fracture on your cheekbone.' With each bone, he points to a spot on his face.

Eren frowns, tugging at the chains bounding his right arm to the wall, experimentally, as if too harsh a tug may shatter it to pieces. 'I'm sorry I used your medicine to fix it.'

'That's the interesting bit!' A new voice booms in the cell, a noise Levi rolls his eyes to, groaning. Footsteps lumber in, followed by a vibrant gleam of the doctor's— Hange, Eren recalls— eyes, wide smile on their face as they shove themselves between the two other men, holding a notebook. 'We don't have anything that magically fixes bones, Eren. Scientifically, it's not possible.'

Throwing the notebook over their shoulder, they dive forward and cradle Eren's face in their hands, awed. Hange pinches the bridge of his nose, then the skin beneath his eye. 'But *you* did it! Your bones fixed themselves! In *front of our eyes!*'

Turning back to look at Erwin, they let go of his face and reach into their pocket. There's a question in their eyes only Erwin knows, one he nods to, turning to Eren. 'Do not panic. We're just trying to show you we're not lying to you again. Hange?'

Eren tilts his head at the comment before a searing pain rips through his arm.

Crying out, tears blurring his vision, he looks over to his right arm. A deep, burning cut runs down from his elbow to his wrist, one so deep he can see his tissue, seething with pain and reckless abandon. Blood begins to pour from the cut, and interestingly enough, even through his tears, he can see the steam begin to rise off of it. Steam.

The medic cries out in delight as they grab Eren's arm, knife forgotten, hastily undoing his bindings to pull the limb closer to their face. Steam fogs up Hange's glasses and they curse, letting go to clean the obstruction. Eren just stares down at himself like viewing a corpse that isn't his. He watches as heat builds and creeps up his arm, his skin melding back together fibre by fibre. Each part of his healed skin drains him more and more, a shock only processed once he falls asleep again. A hand jolts him from his thoughts, smacking him across the face.

'Your files say you grew up in Shiganshina,' Levi begins, keeping eye contact when Eren looks at him, nursing his cheek with his free arm, one that feels foreign, 'so you're no stranger to what a titan is.'

'A titan ate my mum in front of me,' Eren bites back. Even the mention of the memory is enough to drag him back to the punching of Hannes' shoulder in his stomach, his outstretched hands and the way the world seemed to silence itself just so Eren could hear the crunch of his mother's body going limp. He blinks away his tears. 'I just know enough to know they should all be slaughtered.'

'Regardless,' Levi continues, with an apathy that makes Eren grit his teeth, 'I doubt those Garrison cowards managed to get a good hit on any titan for you to see. The thing that makes Titans so invincible is the fact that they only have one weak spot.' Raising his hand, ignoring the instinctive flinch from the child, Levi rubs Eren's nape, raising an eyebrow at the abrupt goosebumps that summon when he touches the flesh. 'Right there. Hit them anywhere else, and they regenerate.'

Eren ducks his head forward, once more at a loss. 'What.. What does that have to do with me?'

'They regenerate exactly like that!' Hange points down to Eren's arm. 'Freaked us out real good, you know? Watching a broken arm fix *itself*! And so fast, too!'

Eren stares. And he stares. And he keeps staring, because in this very moment, no words could possibly be said in order to convey any of what he's thinking. Does he believe them? Does he even have an option not to? He witnessed himself regenerate within moments. Touch on his neck feels weird, aggressive, even if Levi had only grazed it for a moment. The evidence is all there, and no amount of denial or anger can change that. Eren really is no better than the monsters that killed his mother.

If Armin and Mikasa were here, they too would look down at him like the filth of their beaten shoes. He couldn't even blame them.

The first question drifts to his father. Did he have something to do with this? The second, to Mikasa, Armin. Would they turn away from him, or save everyone— and Eren— the trouble and slit his throat in his sleep? The last, to the world, to any ignorant ears willing enough to listen. To anyone who'd hear his meek voice over the sounds of free birds soaring overhead.

'Why?'

Hange's expression falls, smile fading. 'Eh?'

'Why me?' Eren trembles as he says the words, tears garnering in his eyes as he clenches the wet sheets beneath him. 'Why am I the one who has to be like this? Why is it always me?'

Looking down onto his lap, Eren grits his teeth together, trying to stop the sobs that wrench their way from his throat. It's an animal noise, one raw and inherently, purely human. But he's not human anymore. His arm proves it. He's a titan, one of the same that had killed his mother, that had destroyed his life, caged him in these walls, psychosis wrapping his mind enough to make him think he was living a normal life.

The three soldiers are quiet as Eren weeps.

Levi had seen this behaviour before. He'd seen it in rabid dogs, back when he was a child fighting for his life everyday in the Underground. They'd be docile, wait to see intention, before attacking. When cornered, they'd lash out in a frenzy, break bones and tear flesh apart if it meant escape, a semblance of victory. The moment they'd be trapped, true and with no escape, they'd whine. Cry and groan into empty air, waiting to see if anyone had enough pity to let them leave. Levi had seen so many dogs die that way, either in their attempts to live, or their acceptance of capture. Those dogs weren't always rabid. Only when the world shows it, do they remember why they have sharp teeth and a strong bite.

'Eren.' He speaks his name so softly he's unsure whether Eren heard him, though, regardless, he shuffles forward on the bed and takes out his handkerchief, wiping tears away and placing the cloth in his hands. Eren looks up at him, his eyes exhausted, that vibrant emerald muted, squished and dimmed into the lingering after feeling of unadulterated hatred. Notably he seems most shocked Levi hadn't beheaded him there and then. 'You're going to live with us until you can handle yourself. It's better to accept things as they are than try to reject it.'

Eren clutches the handkerchief tight, rubbing his thumb along the engraved initials of L.A on the cloth. Levi watches this display for a moment, before sighing. 'Going back to the walls will get you killed. People nowadays don't care for revolution, they care for order and normalcy. It's tragic, that you've been separated from your friends. If you go back to them, you'll end up getting them killed, as well as yourself. You know what the right decision to make is.'

Pushing off the bed, Levi misses the way it jostles, dragging Eren from his stupor. He misses the way he stares at Levi with eyes of an emotion he'll never be able to name. A fine line, those eyes dance upon, a line Levi fails to see in motion once more. Anger, or determination. Levi leaves the basement by the time Eren wipes at his eyes again, this time with the handkerchief.

Hange clears their throat, smiling gently. 'Well, as long as you don't try to run off again, I'd say you're all ready to move back up to a comfier bed, huh?'

Eren nods. 'Y—Yes...' He hesitates, unsure what to call them.

Hange smiles, endeared. They reach up and card their hand through wet hair. 'Hange. You can just call me Hange, alright? That's the Commander.'

Once more, the child nods, turning to look at Erwin, who offers a smile. 'Okay, Hange.'

They unshackle his other arm and take him by the shoulder out of the basement. The light beats down on Eren— It must be about midday. He stares up at the sky and wonders if Armin and Mikasa are doing the same as they work. Work, for food, for survival, something Eren doesn't have to do anymore. He winces at the thought, looking down to the floor. His feet are muddied and marred in cuts and bruises from the past few days— He'd lost his shoes when he woke up, ratty and useless as they were, and walking around a castle following the sound of muted chatter in the dark isn't the safest.

Erwin tightens his grip on Eren's shoulder, reading his mind. 'We'll get you cleaned up, hm? Captain Levi said he'd take care of you, from what I've heard.'

Eren wasn't sure what to feel of Levi anymore. One moment, he's broken Eren's arms and maybe a few of his ribs without a second glance, then next he's gifted Eren his handkerchief and spoken to him like he'd been a frightened fawn. Eren could only gather that Levi's kindness was a solemn, low hum that only the quiet could pick up on. Eren had never been that quiet— He'd always been loud, unforgiving and brash. It only took loss after loss for him to be forced into silence.

They take Eren off to another room not far from where he'd come from. Hange dismisses themselves upon arrival, but Erwin sticks by him, unwavering as he pushes open a shut door filled with the aroma of lavender. Eren finds himself star-struck— He hadn't been able to take a real bath in ages. It feels like months since he's had the luxury of a bathtub and the soaps that come with it. In Trost, he, Mikasa, and Armin had to do what they could with the canal, drafted in secrecy and fear. If they'd get caught by the clear, clean water, they probably would've been beat black and blue. Sometimes it just wasn't worth the risk. To feel better about their state of hygiene, Armin always said the dirt layering on their skin was like a protective layer, camouflage. The three of them all knew it was rubbish, but Eren embraced it regardless, trying to keep hopes up like his friend.

His smile fades as the memory does. Him getting a luxury while his friends struggle for food alone, while he's no longer even human, doesn't give him any right to be reminiscing.

Levi rolls up his sleeves, lower half of his face obscured in a mask and his hair covered with cloth to protect his head. The only tell of his passiveness is the lessened crease of his eyebrows. Beside him is the biggest bathtub Eren's ever seen, steaming with hot water and diluted with soaps. He stares at Eren ogling at the bathtub, scoffing. Erwin smiles, giving Eren another hair ruffle, before shutting the door behind him and leaving the two to themselves.

'Undress and get in,' Levi says, stepping forward. 'You're filthy.'

Eren nods, albeit a bit dumbly, and moves towards the tub, peering inside. Hesitant, like the bubbles would harm him, he shuffles them around, swirling his hand in the water in an lazy figure of eight until the bubbles clear way to present the soapy water beneath. Levi sighs, grabbing the hem of Eren's shirt and tugging it over his head.

The hot water wraps Eren in a hug as he settles inside. Even sat on his knees, the water makes it up to his shoulders, and for a moment, he feels guilty having this much water used on him. Levi watches him mess around with the bubbles, piling them on his hand and blowing them away, nonspeaking. He feels weirdly nostalgic, watching the kid marvel at something as menial as hot, soapy water. It reminds him of Isabel, the rowdy kid with too much to care about, and the first night they stayed at this very headquarters, planning to kill the one man Levi now protects with his life.

How life changes.

Levi gets to work quickly. He grabs a small bucket and dips it in the water, gathering a good amount before dumping it over the kid's head. His hair loses a majority of its volume and lays flat, masking his face, the content smile and satisfied shivers that run along his back.

'Tch. How old are you, ten? You should be able to do this by yourself by now.'

Yet Levi slaps away the prune-y hand when it comes to his head, scrubbing the soap in himself. Dirt and small twigs drift down to the bathwater, months-old-dirt crumbling off and into the water, radiating from the child like a defensive barrier. Levi wrinkles his nose. *Barrier* is definitely a fitting word. They sit in silence, Eren kicking his legs gently and Levi momentarily pouring water over his head. He can't get the image of Isabel out, no matter how hard he tries to push the memories aside, so in wake of ignoring the rampant grief, Levi speaks.

'Do you understand why I hurt you, Eren?'

Eren jolts, tilting his head up at Levi to look at him. Forest eyes meet silver, and Levi fights the instinct to look away. The kid seems not to notice, the habit of look past the small things a luxury in his world. Instead, he worries his bottom lip for a moment, before nodding weird. He winks an eye shut as a dribble of water travels across his head and into his eyebrow. 'Yes, Captain Levi.'

'Do you understand why you can't go back to Trost, then?' Levi moves his head back facing forward, scrubbing the back of his neck now. Eren shivers at each passing feeling of a hand over his nape, though he tries to ignore it, stuffing the feeling down.

He hesitates, when responding to this.

'Yes, Captain Levi.' Eren pauses in his fiddling, sighing softly. 'It's probably a good thing that Mikasa and Armin don't have to see me all the time anymore.'

That catches Levi's attention. He knows he practically beat the incentive to leave out of the kid, but— 'You were so eager to get back to them?'

'Well—' And Eren halts again, clearly debating the admittance of whatever information he has. 'They're always protecting me. And I don't like it, so I get mad at them. They always have to calm me down, or I do something stupid that gets all of us in trouble. They were always the ones to drag me out of my head.' Resigned, he kicks out a leg and some water splashes out of the tub. He mutters an apology below his breath when Levi tightens his fingers in his hair. 'Mikasa's super strong, and Armin's really smart. It's better they've got each other. I don't want them to see me, not like this.'

Levi hums, processing the words. 'You want to know something, kid? Something small I noticed in the little time I've know you.' He splashes water over Eren's head again, watching the last of the dirt and grime dilute away. 'You're smarter than you think you are— You managed to fool an entire room of high-levelled soldiers into thinking you were asleep, and listened to us talk without giving it away. Then you snuck out past a majority of them again, and still, even after you got caught, you fought.'

'You don't know how to give up, and that's a trait that keeps soldiers alive for years.'

Eren stares down at the water, nodding solemnly. Most of the bubbles have popped or drifted to the edges of the water, leaving little room to gather them and blow them away again. He

continues making figures of eight beneath the water, stirring its surface. His teary eyes glare at him in his opaque reflection. Then, softly, 'I miss mom.'

To that, Levi's heart aches, and he offers a gentle squeeze on Eren's shoulder. 'I'm sorry.'

Chapter End Notes

I tried to encapsulate Eren "THIS IS WHAT YOU GET FOR BEING WHAT YOU ARE!!" Jaeger as much as I could

Chapter 3: Andronitis

Chapter Summary

Frustration with how long it takes to get to know someone.

Eren growing up with the Scouts. The knowledge that he is not just what he seems.

Chapter Notes

I really wanted to explore the idea of being stuck in the titan this chapter, which will be touched on later on. Mikasa and Armin are not completely forgotten!!!

o shit sorry to everyone getting so many emails from me back-to-back cus of this

Whoever potentially even hinted at the fact that Eren Jaeger was an easy child to raise needed to be publicly executed.

Hange yelps as they duck out of the way of another stone, chasing after Eren in the dead of night in the middle of Wall Rose. Eren growls, reaching in his pocket for more, chucking it behind him. It hits Hange dead-on in the forehead— Nice aim—, but does little to deter them.

Yes, the fact that Eren did seem to be calming down one or two days after his arrival was a little suspicious. He did the exact same thing on his first day, and Eren may have been a good liar and actor, but he sure as hell wasn't a creative one. Hange was just the idiot who had fallen for the same trick twice. And yes, the fact that Eren spent a majority of his day collecting rocks under Hange's supervision should've made them glance twice or even dig deeper into his reasoning ("*I want to make a rock tower*," he told them with the most half-assed expression), but it didn't.

Eren ran off in the middle of the night and took the rocks with him. It was his protection, because in his childlike naivety, he thoroughly believed he could make it all the way to Trost with a pocket full of stones and burning ambition. They had explained why he couldn't go there— He could heal like a Titan, he was officially dead in legal records, *he was sneaking into the walls*— but apparently the words went in one ear and out the other. Hange didn't know whether to be incredibly irritated or incredibly fascinated with his indomitable spirit.

When the sun fell, he had told Hange he wanted to grab some water and promised them he could navigate to the kitchen blind by now. Hange had believed him. He did know the place well enough, Hange knew it well.

(If it wasn't from Scouts using him as an errand boy now that they had power over someone in the headquarters, it was Levi forcing him to train by running laps all day. Hange had once walked in on Eren stumbling through the hallways to the courtyard, sweat dripping down his face, eyes delirious with exhaustion. His jog was uncoordinated and each pant came out loud enough to echo in the hall. They hadn't even managed to call his name out before Eren hit the floor, passed out.

He'd, according to Levi that night in the mess hall, been ordered to run around the headquarters as many times as he could until he fainted— And Levi would know when Eren would. The captain said he was surprised that Eren surpassed his expectations, even if only by a little, but mumbled that it might've been spite to excel. Hange remembers asking what he'd done to deserve such a punishment— Something that someone like Shadis would have forced a mouthy trainee to do—, and Levi had shrugged, taking a sip from his tea.

"He couldn't spell Omni-Directional.")

They weren't a complete idiot, though— They hovered far enough so Eren wouldn't be suspicious that he was being followed—, and was able to immediately begin pursuing the moment Eren pushed those front doors open and made a run for it. Hange *did* make sure to scream Eren's name loud enough so Levi or Erwin would wake up and Eren would hopefully give in at the thought of being chased down by the man who broke his arm into two. They had too high expectations for a stubborn child like Eren Jaeger.

Now here they are— Chasing a ten year old kid through the night, up and down the rise and fall of Wall Rose, the gate for Trost smaller than Hange's fingernail. Eren's pocket was only getting lighter, and Hange was only getting better at avoiding the rocks. It was actually sort of impressive, Eren's stamina— Hange didn't know whether it was adrenaline, titan ability, or childlike energy that has kept Eren running for a good ten minutes now at full speed. They could only keep up because they'd been to a camp designed to keep them sprinting and moving for hours on end.

'Leave me alone!' Eren pants out, pushing himself with a short burst of energy to jump over a small canal of clear water. The moonlight breathes out his silhouette over the stream as Hange soon follows after. A stone distorts their reflections and sinks to the bedding. 'Let me see my friends!'

'Eren, you know better than to do this,' Hange screams right back, extending their arm to grab the back of his shirt. He yelps, falling towards Hange, hanging by his coat as the soldier holds him up. He glares and tries to kick, but he's obviously worn himself out with all this running. Hange looks back to Headquarters— They were a decent distance away. Levi's running punishments probably had something to do with it. 'Come on, let's head back, and if you come back without me needing to carry you, I won't tell Commander Smith.'

'He's just going to make me do chores!' Eren snaps, clawing at Hange's arm as they begin moving off. They can't help but let out a very amused laugh— The action is reminiscent of a

puppy teething. Eren doesn't share the sentiment, growing more frustrated at Hange's chuckle. 'I don't care! I wanna see my friends!'

'But what's the point of seeing your friends when you're gonna make the Commander angry?'

Eren looks at Hange with the most exasperated look they think they've ever seen on a kid's face. He doesn't even notice the headquarters growing bigger and bigger, and if all goes well, he won't until it's too late and he's being shoved into Levi's office. 'Who cares? I'm gonna be gone anyway.'

'Yes, but he's gonna be mad.' Hange taps their chin with their freehand, humming. 'And he's gonna take that out on the rest of us, then you'll have a whole regiment wanting your head.'

Eren huffs, baring his teeth as he doubles his efforts with kicking and scratching. It sort of hurts, but thankfully not as much as before Levi had sat him down and forced him to keep still long enough to cut his nails— Those things were *sharp*. Hange briefly wonders if Eren had ever cut his nails beforehand, but then looks at the boy practically frothing at the mouth, and disregards the thought. Probably not. Hange has come to notice that Levi is doing a lot of the heavy lifting when it comes to Eren— He bathes him, takes care of him, teaches him basic hygiene. The only things he doesn't do are cooking and teaching, though, to be completely honest, he's well on his way, despite Eren only having been in their care for two days or so. It's almost like way back when, with those friends of Levi's.

'What about Levi?'

Eren goes suspiciously still at that. Hange smiles.

'What's gonna happen when I go back, all sad and mopey, and I tell Levi what you did?' Hange grins at Eren's sudden expression of guilt— It's probably not ethical to be using Levi as a wedge to make Eren listen for once, but that sin is between Hange and whatever may be up there in the heavens. 'Levi's gonna be furious, but more importantly, he's gonna feel betrayed that he spent so much time taking care of you in these past two days and it's all wasted cus you ran away.'

A long, sullen pause is how long it takes for Eren to answer. 'I don't care.' It's not very convincing.

'Sure you do,' Hange chuckles, and shoves Eren in Levi's office to be dealt with.

Levi's office is a scary, scary place. Despite all the shoes that have trodden on the carpeting, it's as clean as it would be if brand new. The fabric isn't exactly luxury, but it's fancy enough in Eren's eyes that he feels uneasy being on it without being squeaky clean. There are no decorations, no memoirs or drawings or letters or anything to make it feel homey— The walls are blank, the desk is clear except for work, and there's ultimately nothing remarkable in this room that makes it look lived in. That's what makes it memorable as Levi's.

Eren clenches the carpeting beneath his fingers as the weight of betrayal begins to settle into his skin. He stares at the fabric for at least a good few minutes. Charcoal sets down on the table, paper dismissed.

Levi clears his throat. 'Get up, Jaeger.'

Eren'd only ever been referred to by his last name mere days ago, begging for his food stamps from the Military Police. Hearing it said by a voice that he looks up to irks him, and brings him stumbling to his feet before he can even consider the thought of being stubborn. His hands are laced with dirt, sweat, hidden between the prints of his palms, from gathering rocks and hurling them behind himself all day. Just thinking about how long ago the morning was hits him with an abrupt wave of exhaustion— Had he even considered to eat? He thought his plan was so sure-fire, but he forgot things as simple as eating. Eren keeps his eyes on the carpeting, not daring to move them up in fear of making eye contact with the captain and being petrified into stone. Armin told him that story once, and he was so sure it was fake that he made eye contact with everyone— Now it was a habit, and people got uncomfortable talking to him because his eyes wouldn't leave them for one moment.

Except for now. Eren is looking down at his feet like he could turn himself into stone. He doesn't remember if Armin said anything about the stone thing being self-inflicted.

A few papers rustle on the desk before Levi sighs, knocking on the desk. The sound is so unprecedented that Eren looks up, and falls right into the trap of locking eye contact with the Captain. He looks more disappointed than annoyed, and that hurts more than if Levi had been willing to break his arm again. Eren shivers at the memory.

'Again?' Levi raises an eyebrow at the child, unamused. 'Eren, I thought we went over this. You can't go back. You have to stay with us.'

'I wanna see my friends,' Eren protests, though a weak argument. It's the same one he's been using the past few days.

'Well you can't,' Levi bites back with as much anger, clenching his fist. 'What the hell do I have to drill into your head to get you to understand, brat?' Tapping the desk with his finger, Levi enunciates every single word. 'If you go back, they will kill you and everyone you know.'

Eren huffs, kicking at the carpet. 'I'll die with my friends then.'

Levi puts his head in his hands for a moment, taking a deep, deep breath. 'Go to your basement, Eren. If you're not there in the morning, I'll make you clean this entire place with your tongue.'

And for a tiny reprieve, Eren does listen this time.

Eren's first expedition, two weeks after his arrival, comes in the form of a patrol around Wall Rose to ensure the Armoured or Colossal Titans haven't arrived and broken another hole

through the walls.

He sits in the bumpy ride of the supply wagon, tasked with making sure nothing falls out and goes to waste, and while he does this, Eld and Gunther teach him basic maths. Eren seems to intake the information well enough, understanding concepts and solving what can be on a bumpy ride with clumsy child hands on paper, but he gets frustrated very easily.

'Why do we have to know this?' Petra hears him whine, casting over a glance to the supply wagon to see Gunther helplessly trying to coax Eren back into trying the question again on his own horse.

'Think about it like this,' Eld offers. 'Say we all need supplies really quickly, Eren. We all need four gas canisters each, but only one of us came to you to grab the items. You need to know how many you need to give that one person so everyone has enough.'

Eren tilts his head, sceptical. 'Why would only one of you come?'

'Don't think about the logistics behind it, focus on the premise of what the issue is,' Gunther prods, following along with the story. It's evidently not the first maths problem Eren has tried to logic his way out of doing. 'We each need four canisters, and there are fifty of us. How many gas canisters would you need to give that one person so they could take it back to everyone else?'

Humming, Eren leans down to the floor of the supply wagon, scribbling down on the crumpled paper with his charcoal. He comes back up a moment later and offers his paper to Gunther, who shakily takes it, scanning through as he rides his horse. Smiling he hands it back and offers Eren a proud pat on the shoulder. 'Good work, kid!'

Petra smiles, turning her eyes back ahead of her.

She's not sure what to think about Eren Jaeger. At first he appeared like some defenceless kid, but then he nearly stabbed Oluo in the back. Days later, he's roaming behind Captain and the Commander like a puppy, and when he's not behind them, he's cleaning, getting as close to Captain's idea of perfection as a kid can. He sleeps in the barracks, alone and in the corner, keeps to himself, biting back only when someone gets too patronising. He's a big explosion with a short fuse, a rowdy kid that hides his true potential under layers of what feels like a forced childishness, even if Petra knows it's ridiculous. You can't fake exactly what you are. Petra hasn't gotten much one-on-one time with him. She's too young to worry about how to handle a child, but the few times she's been stuck with him, they haven't been horrendous.

He'll just be minding his own business and reading one of Erwin's encyclopedias about the Walls' history while she makes herself tea. Oddly enough, sometimes, reading those books, he'll scoff and shake his head, turning the page. Whatever he knew that Petra didn't that made such a riveting history so disappointing, she'll never know.

The only other time Petra has managed to run into Eren has been through the rise of dawn. Being an early riser, she'll step out of the female barracks and stretch her hands over her head, before noticing the small grunts of pain and frustration coming from the courtyard.

Eren will be going one-on-one with Levi, more so punching and trying to land a decent hit in, if at all, while Levi evades and dodges.

'It's good to get the practice in early,' Levi had explained when she asked later that evening, trying to ignore the uncanny sight of titan steam coming off of a cut Eren had gotten that day. Levi had unexpectedly pulled out a pocket knife towards the end of their training, and now all Eren could do was talk about how much he wanted his own to do the same. 'When I was growing up, fighting was one of the first things I learned how to do.'

She'd been hesitant to approach him ever since his first night. It's not so much a matter of indifference as much as it is a matter of fear. Hange confirmed with Eren numerous times, he really was a titan and Hange capitalised on that to run numerous tests. It was a little daunting, to hear cries of fear from Eren at the crack of dawn followed by screams, but Hange always assured Levi— Who'd been oddly protective of the boy— that Eren was a trooper, enduring every test with a bright smile after the fact. Levi didn't seem convinced, and had taken it upon himself to treat Eren to galloping horse rides after each test.

Days would pass and each hypothesis they ran would result in Eren growing back a limb, or walking off some grand injury in minutes. It scared Petra. Eren wasn't human, but he acted like one, spoke like one, and looked like one. He wasn't anything Petra had ever seen before, and it scared her enough to avoid talking to him.

It reminded her of what she had overheard Levi telling Eren that first night in the basement. *People nowadays don't care for revolution, they care for order and normalcy.* Petra supposed she'd be a key example of that. But in those few moments where she could forget his nuances and remember he was just an angry kid, she felt something worth calling affectionate for him.

Eren peers over the side of the supply wagon, idly fiddling with loose bits of plank wood as he watches the scenery pass by. His mind adrift, Petra watches as he stares into nothing for a while, before sitting up, eyes brightening. Eren's had a way of radiating, reflecting the sun off of them and into the moods of all else nearby— he was personified hope. He crawls over to the front of the wagon, tapping the Scout sat on it by the shoulder. 'Can I talk to Erw— the Commander? I have a question.'

Evidently, he'd yet to remove himself of the habit of calling high-ranking people by their names. It was a tendency that would get him scolded at best, beat within an inch of his life at worst. Was that even possible with someone like Eren? Is that why he's always so confident in his audacity?

The Scout smiles, endeared. Petra can't help but chuckle too. 'Well, I can't get him directly over to you, but I can pass along the message if you tell me what it is.'

Eren leans forward and whispers something into his ear. The Scout, unknowing, whistles over Petra. Petra rides forward, sitting straight, prepared to receive and pass along the message. Did Eren get some sort of Titan intuition? Did he feel Titans coming from somewhere? Remember something about how he might've become a Titan?

The boy turns to Petra, crawling closer to her on the wagon. He recognises her as one of the people in Levi's squad, the people he sees the most, and the only girl in it. Hange is still iffy

on the matter. 'Can you ask the Commander if we can stop at Trost? I want to see my friends, and we're going in their direction.'

Petra purses her lips. 'I dunno, Eren. The government doesn't know you're with us, and if your friends ever made a report, they think you're dead. Is it really a good idea to go somewhere where there're a lot of policemen?' Eren's smile falters. He thinks on it, looking down to the floor with a pensive expression, however pensive a ten year old can look. After a moment, he nods, sliding back down to the wagon floor.

Petra purses her lips, offering him a sad shrug. 'Sorry, Eren.'

'It's okay,' the kid responds, dejected. He rubs at his eyes, fighting back prickling tears, fighting off his immaturity. Fighting himself for his own nature. 'I get it.'

Later that night, Eren is listening to the Levi Squad talk about their experiences outside the walls.

'But I refused to die! Not Oluo! I leapt forward with my broken blade and killed that monster with one hand!' Oluo triumphantly pats his chest with his fist, cracking an eye open. The others at the table stare at him with deadpan looks, but the one look of awe is all he needs to keep his ego inflated.

Levi notices, duly, this is his first glimpse of Eren being a real, true child. It's endearing more than irritating, as the Captain had guessed, but he'd never say it aloud.

Eren leans forward in his seat, smiling. He'd barely sat down before Oluo had gone on his tangent trying to fall in the kid's good graces, and his food is beginning to cool. 'Woah..! Where was everyone else? Shouldn't've they been helping you?'

Oluo falters. 'They... were outside the forest! I was completely alone, ready to defend myself with my own wit and prowess! I ran back to Wall Maria on my own two feet. Only my athleticism and my raw will to live kept me alive.'

'Where was your horse?' Eyes turn to Oluo, who hesitates.

'The... titan killed it.' Eren frowns, tilting his head.

'I thought Captain Levi said titans didn't care about other animals.' Petra stifles a smirk, hiding it behind her bread roll. Eld doesn't do Oluo the same dignity. Eren's amusement begins to fade, blurring into distaste. Petra can't hold in the snort as Oluo fumbles at Eren's glare. 'Even I know that. I read it in a book.'

Turning his face away, digging his face in his food, Oluo protests, 'Well this one did! No book triumphs over experience, boy.'

Eren seems to take that as an acceptable response, his expression twisting into understanding.

'Did it really?' Hange intercepts, leaning forward from their side of the table. An immediate spark flares in their eyes as they get to their feet. Attached by a string, Eren immediately perks up at Hange's volume, turning his attention to them. 'I need to know more! We've never

heard of a titan caring about animals other than humans! Why didn't you say anything before?'

Levi reaches up and drags Hange back down before they can leap across the table to Oluo, notebook in hand. 'You moron. He's lying.' He says it loud enough for Eren to hear, but Eren's already leaning in to continue listening to Oluo. Petra sighs. Kids and their one-track minds.

'Wait, why didn't you send a flare or try screaming? Did you run in silence?'

Oluo swallows, word falling flat. He scratches his ear as he frowns, he himself doubting Eren's wonder. Eren *had* been picking up a few of Levi's mannerisms.. He honestly wouldn't put it past the boy to be mocking him, sarcasm lacing every word with honey as a saccharine glaze. Even Oluo doesn't believe himself as he says, '...I bit my tongue.'

'That doesn't stop you from screaming. Or sending a flare.'

Gunther places a hand on Eren's back, lest Oluo turns any brighter. 'Let's eat, Eren. You haven't even touched your food. If it grows cold, you'll have to wait even more to let it heat up again.'

Eren hums, staring down at his plate. His eyes dim. Sometimes, he does this— Spacing out during dinner. He stares down at his potato soup and bread like the food is too good for him to have, like it's missing a key ingredient that it's just not worth eating without. Often, he'll refuse to eat at all, forced only by Levi's stern commands and Erwin's gentle prodding. Today is not one of those days. He grabs the bread and breaks off a stubborn piece, forcing it into his mouth. *You have something good, accept it*, his expression says.

'Slow down,' Levi calls out, holding his hand out despite being farther down the table. A snark fills his tone as he lowers his arm, mumbling, 'or you'll choke before getting to ask Oluo about his *adventures*.'

The table bursts into a round of laughter, and for once, Petra is happy for the change of pace. The kid isn't so bad— After event after event of tragedy and stress, having a bright-eyed and loud-mouthed kid around helps, however weird he may be. He's a kid, after all, healing or not. He's been through a lot, and to shun him out would be cruel, Petra decides.

'Wait, how did you slice its nape with one blade?'

'Hold on tight to my back.'

Eren huffs and squirms as he wraps his arms around Levi's neck, huddling close. He's surprised to the moon and back that Levi even let him do this— He guesses weeks of begging to use the ODM gear had finally broken him in. Eren had been enamoured ever since he was

a kid, watching the Garrison zip up the walls when they were bothered. Hannes always said it made him feel sick, but Eren reckons that was just the alcohol.

Levi tightens the belt fastening their torsos once more, leaving almost no breathing room for the two of them, and glances over his shoulder to Eren. Eren's wiggling around so ecstatic that Levi feels dread that he'll manage to slip out and fall to his death mid-air. Not that Levi would let that happen, or for a matter of fact, the rest of the Levi Squad, who'll be following them around. All this trouble for a mouthy kid.

'And remember—' Eld holds his hand up, cross as he ruffles Eren's hair. 'You wanted to do this, and the price was more lessons tomorrow. So no complaining. I don't wanna hear that you didn't think it through, because you did.'

Eren pouts, clutching Levi tighter as if Levi would agree with him that the lessons were stupid. All Levi does is sigh, shaking his head. 'Eren, learning is a privilege. You're a smart kid, and I don't want that to go to waste because you just want to have fun. You have to balance it out, or you're not gonna be able to become a Scout.' He hesitates for a moment, before adding on with deliberation, '..Or use the ODM gear yourself.'

Eren tenses, and begins anxiously rocking his feet on either side of Levi's hips. Eld, thankful for the support, nods fervently. 'You know how many calculations we have to do in the middle of the air? If you don't know your stuff, you'll end up with your spine broken in half before you could even start moving fast.'

Eren stills at the mention of the spine, and Levi sends his soldier a glare. Eld purses his lips, rubbing Eren's back soothingly, a silent apology in the motion. Brightening himself up, Eld's gaze returns full force. 'You got it? So no complaining tomorrow, I wanna see you up and at 'em in the cafeteria by nine.'

The kid sighs, long and suffering, his forehead thunking into the space between Levi's shoulder blades. 'Yes Eld...'

Eld hums, satisfied, and walks off. Levi jostles Eren, garnering his attention once more. 'Okay, you remember everything? No tilting your head back, no holding your arms out, no kicking your legs. You are just a *weight* on my back and nothing more, Eren. Doing this with you on me is completely new to me as well, so we're going to start safe until I feel more confident. What was my one hard limit?'

'If you think even for a second it's unsafe to keep moving, everything's off.'

'Good boy,' Levi praises, and like that, they're off.

Moving around with Eren on his back makes some of his usual manoeuvres little more clunky than Levi would prefer, but he can't complain. Just the thought of being off the ground and moving around seems to bring Eren to a state of pure ecstasy, laughing and looking side-to-side as if the world spun around him, marvelling the trees as they pass by. Even turns that have Levi tilting one bit to the side— A classic, almost rookie move— has Eren screaming in delight, his eyes wide open and adrenaline rushing through his body. It's hard not to admit that the scene is extremely endearing.

'Captain!' Oluo calls out, causing Levi to dare a look over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of Eren's hair flailing and flapping all around in the wind. 'I'll launch you!'

Levi's smile fades for just a moment, before he nods, releasing his hook's hold on the trees. He feels the pressure of Eren's hands tighten around his collarbone as he allows himself to free fall, arms stretched out. Oluo's sturdy grip meets his, and they spin in the air for a moment before Levi launches off. Eren's screaming fades away into white noise, distant and almost hysteric. Levi feels like a bird, taking off from the canopy, body light and free as he hovers above the treeline for a moment, enjoying the sun. The moment his body falls to gravity, he's tightening his grip on his gear, peering over his shoulder.

His heart drops to his ass to see absolutely nothing.

The leaves and branches scratch against his bare skin as he falls down through the canopy. His body flails at the mercy of nature's wooden arms, his mind spinning. The manoeuvre was too smooth for three people, of course it was. Levi should have been able to see that. He didn't. He lost himself to his own entertainment and Eren would have to pay the price for it. As always. *As always*. Always, the people around him have to pay.

The grass calls his name but his blood calls faster. His body tightens on his grapple triggers and launches himself upwards, fast enough to zip himself to a thick enough branch to stand on. The world around him sways, and he follows, rocking on his feet. He looks around for but a moment, his heart pounding in his ears. When did Eren fall? When did his screams begin to filter out? When did Levi let go? Who's to blame for Eren falling, Eren getting hurt, or worse, Eren dying? Would the child die at Levi's hands? Would the child have fallen to his death watching Levi fly above him?

His eyes hone in on an influx of Scout cloaks on the ground where Oluo had launched him, and his body moves before his mind to rush down. Levi hooks onto the ground and zips down with enough force to rattle his legs as he rolls forward, trying to play off the momentum, setting himself into a sprint the moment he can.

'Eren!'

Shoving past his squad members, Levi crouches down to Eren, checking him for injuries. His arm is steaming up, but it's not broken— He must've caught himself on a branch as he fell. Almost tranquil, a hideous comparison to a corpse resting at ease, Eren's eyelashes flutter as he blinks himself awake again.

The silence holds strong in the air, as he sits up, the squad giving him space to look at his arm. A tear runs down his cheek but he barely seems to understand why, rubbing the crystal into a smear. He turns from it to Levi, then to Oluo.

Eld purses his lips, running his hand up and down Eren's arm, dispersing the steam. 'Eren? Are you alright, kid?'

'I fell..?' The boy looks down at his arm, then up at the canopy. It reflects in his emerald eyes like a mirror. Levi holds his breath. '...I fell.'

Like a switch, his expression shifts. His face breaks out in the fattest smile Levi is sure he's ever seen on Eren's face. 'That was so fun! Can we do it again?'

Oluo lets out a shaky sigh of relief, clutching his heart. His knees look like they'll give out beneath him, which is understandable. He was the one who suggested the launch. He was the one who watched Eren slip free of the harness. He was the first to shoot to the ground after watching Eren hit a branch or two on the way down. Oluo would never admit it, but the kid had grown on him inseparably, and the idea that he'd be the one to kill Eren terrified him.

Petra holds a hand out, gesturing to Oluo and Levi's equally as startled looks. 'How about we call it a day, Eren? You're gonna be tired and grumpy from all the healing. We can start again next week.'

Eren frowns, but nods, moving to his feet and happily trotting off after Petra, Eld, Gunther, and Miche. Oluo and Levi exchange a look, Levi's guilt merged into loathe, before the captain hurries after, determined to make sure the cut didn't get infected. Levi, upon reaching them, would've tried harder, but all Eren could talk about was how fun it was, how exhilarating the experience of flying was, how he felt like a bird. Levi felt the same sentiment, and promised Eren he'd be able to manage it alone soon as he rubbed a bit of water and his napkin into the healing wound, drawing disgruntled noises from the boy. Hell— if it were up to Levi, Eren would have already have known how to put the gear on and hightail it, but the straps, the gear, the weapons, they're all too big for him.

They'd just have to wait until he's grown older.

Eren is a pretty fast grower. It's pissing Levi off.

One moment, he's ten and making it to Levi's shoulder, which is already too high. Next moment, it's the 30th of March and suddenly they're the same height. He hasn't even hit puberty. Hange seemed to find this news delightful, laughing until they stumbled around, light-headed.

'They're feeding us the same thing,' Levi mutters, glaring at his kid from the corner of his eye. 'It's ridiculous.'

Eren chuckles, shrugging. He looks at home in his military uniform, donning the Wings of Freedom with pride. It had been a preemptive birthday gift from Oluo, Eld, Petra, and Gunther. 'I don't do it on purpose, Heichou.'

They've all decided to celebrate his birthday outside, in the fresh air and cozy atmosphere. It's also been an exact year since Eren had first arrived, so it was all the more special. The rest didn't really celebrate their birthdays with this much bravado; all it was often was just a cake,

something of a party, and laughs all around. However, no matter how tall the kid was or how much he'd been through, he was still exactly that— A kid.

Hange tosses their confetti around the table with the cake sat atop it, leaning down by the seated birthday boy to chat away. Levi cleans the knife for the cake once more, then the plate it's to be sat on just in case. They forbade the use of candles, unwilling to eat cake with teenage spit all over it. Instead, Eren's to fire a flare of his choosing into the sky, supply wastage that Erwin turned a blind eye to, just this once.

There isn't much a group of a hundred-something adults could do to make a child happy for a birthday, so most of the day is spent having fun out in the plains next to headquarters, chatting, drinking, and for Eren, unwrapping presents. He's had presents before, from his parents and his friends— The mention of which makes him purse his lips and push the thought away—, but the wooden cars and books meant little to him. He liked spending time with them, more than anything. That's not to say he's complaining about receiving gifts, though.

He received a hair comb and pocket knife from Levi— The handle had been custom whittled to represent the layout of Shiganshina. His home was the only home made out of engraved brass, sticking out of the map above all. Oluo, Petra, and Miche had collectively banded together to give him contraband books on anything about the creation of the Walls— "He's already technically illegal, so a couple books shouldn't hurt, right?". Gunther and Eld bought him fancy pens and pencils made from trees only found in the interior with the Top Brass. Hange and Moblit gave him a book on astronomy and a ball attached to a paddle. It was surprisingly unclear what came from who.

The festivities continue deep into the sunset. At some point, Levi notices Eren slipping away from his table to Headquarters, yet leaves him be. He knows where Eren's running off to. There's a very sneaky way to get up to the roof of the Headquarters without having to unlock any of the locked doors leading to it, and while Levi and his friends were the ones to coin the route, Eren had discovered it on his own. He fled there sometimes, to watch the sky. Levi finds solace in the fact that Hange was somehow vaguely on the nail with what they had gotten Eren.

Eren feels the breeze run through his hair, hugging his neck, a comforting pat he's rarely gotten these years. The sun hurt his eyes, blinding him. Contrastingly, it bathes him in a golden hue that saturates his skin, his shadow behind him stretching on for miles. Yet, he can't focus much on it. The birthday is great. He *is* having fun. He's living a good life, with good people who— While not at first— love him and care for him, in their own unique ways. Eren can find little complaint on his lips about his life, where whatever happened the last time he saw his father had led him.

But it isn't right. Nothing feels... *right*.

He can only ever stare at the sunset, to feel connected with the two people he cares for most. He will always wonder what they thought happened to him, if he got kidnapped, if he ran off due to his own selfish gains, if he'd just had enough one day, and his body was out there to find. No matter what they think he did, whether they mourn him or hate him, he loves them all the same. When even their reflections begin to hate them, he'll keep loving them.

Eren kicks a stone off the roof, sighing to himself. This was supposed to be a fun day. He's just dampened his own resolve. With a resolute huff, Eren wipes the tears from his eyes, and turns to head back downstairs for the cake. And the flare. He's wanted to fire one ever since his first expedition, when he saw the Commander use the green one to steer Scouts away from an obtrusive forest in Wall Rose.

Warm smiles greet him back, so Eren shoves his thoughts aside and greets them with as much joy, practically skipping over to the table. He's never gotten a cake before. His mother always made a custard or his favourite dinner— Cakes were for the people in Sina, who had never had to hunt for something to eat for at least a week. Though, Erwin pulled a few strings, and here sits a cake in front of him, surrounded by a crowd of people clapping him on.

He stares down at the scrawled, *Happy Birthday Eren!* and frowns. If only Armin and Mikasa were here. If only he could get a glimpse of them now, just for the comfort that they're alive. And, abruptly, it's like his mind is drifting, dreaming, if only for a moment, of pale hands shakily tracing the words into the cream, a bright smile covered with a red scarf enveloping him whole with Armin following no later after. Eren dreams of their faces when eating the cake, their lit up eyes, their wide smiles and chocolate-coated tongues. He dreams, because they keep in his mind all the time, stored away in the back like the pendant of a soldier at war. They are what he fights for.

Cloth nudges at his eyes, dragging him back down to Earth. Levi tuts, shaking his head slowly as he folds his handkerchief back in his pocket. 'If you're going to cry over the sight of the cake alone, I'd be damn worried about when you actually eat it.'

Eren hums, confused, and reaches up to graze his finger across his eyelashes. It came back with a fat droplet of a salty tear on the tip, dripping down his hand and into his sleeve. Staring down at his sleeve, he watches the fabric dampen, before rubbing it on his pants, looking up to the Captain. He offers a weak smile.

'Sorry, Heichou. I was just— Thinking.'

Levi's frown softens, and for a moment, it feels he'll say something. He bites it back, glancing away. At Eren's raised brow, Levi clicks his tongue, harsh yet without malice. 'I'll tell you after you cut the cake. Better get to it, brat.'

Eyes are beginning to turn to him. Smiles light up in the crowd and chatter begins to come to a stop as attention is turned on the boy. Eren shrinks under the weight, murmuring a curse beneath his breath that Levi elbows him for. He remains paralysed in place, unsure of whether to say something, or to cut the cake, or to wave everyone back to talking so he could ease into the ambience once more, lost to the noise.

'Why don't you say a few words, Eren?' Erwin finally calls out, plunging a hand into lake water to stop Eren from drowning. Hange, by Eren's side, sneakily slips him a green flare launcher.

They smile, and Eren smiles back, blushing. Eren had always been a bit of a spectacle at the headquarters— it wasn't often people saw an eleven year old kid running around, doing chores, training preemptively—, but he'd never actually made a spotlight for himself. He was

the odd detail in life that never needed to be questioned, a weird trait which everyone has but no-one brings up. He'd never really garnered much attention from the Scouts outside the Levi Squad.

Getting up from his seat, knife placed down on the table, Eren clears his throat. He places his right fist over his chest, other fidgeting behind his back, and speaks as loud as he can. 'I thank you all for keeping me safe and treating me as one of your own at the Scout Regiment. If you all hadn't been patient with me, I would have ended up much worse off than I am now.'

'He's pretty poor already,' Levi interjects, which receives a few laughs from the crowd and an affronted look from the boy, who whips around to give him a betrayed look. The captain only nods forward once more, prodding Eren to continue.

'A lot has happened in my life, and after watching my mother die, I was sure I was destined to die the same death in the Scout Regiment.' Mind flashing images of his mother in her last few moments, Eren swallows, blanking the sight out. 'But everyone here has prevented that from happening and more, teaching me, feeding me, and taking care of me. I couldn't be more thankful for it— I've been taught to appreciate the good things that come my way, good things I've ignored in the past due to my own temper. So, to the Scout Regiment, and the fight for humanity, I give my life, and my heart.' Biting the inside of his lip, unaware of how to finish, Eren trails off.

Awkwardly, he reaches for the flare gun and aims it to the sky, a hand pressing on his ear as he pulls the trigger. The flare launches into the sky, shooting for the stars, and Eren watches it sway to the side, dazzled.

Petra glances around before bringing her hands together. It starts as a singular noise but descends into a cacophony of cheering and clapping, hands ruffling Eren's hair and slapping him on the back. Though, throughout the chaos, he faintly catches the sight of Erwin nodding at him, prideful, and nothing feels more accomplishing than that.

People step back at Levi's prodding to allow Eren to actually cut the cake. With the setting sun and the rapidly dimming light, they have little time. Eren glances back at Levi for a moment before huffing to himself, grabbing the knife, holding it to the cake. Levi reaches over, grabbing his wrist.

'Careful. You're holding the knife too far over the cake— You're gonna make the handle dirty.' He drags it back until the tip of the knife rests about a third of the way, letting Eren hold his own hand there. 'Make sure you don't cut out a piece— We need to divide this amongst a hundred men.'

'Yes, Heichou.' Eren brings the knife down, piercing the cursive writing, the chocolate cream. It leaves a deep mark that the surrounding cake leans into, however never sinks. Remembers, deeply affected, yet never caves into. Eren stares down at the cake, then at Hange as they spoon off a piece and hold it out to him. His confusion blatant on his face, they grin, tilting their head.

'Say ahh.' And why would Eren refuse?

By the time Levi can step out to stop the tragedy, Hange smooshes the spoon across Eren's cheek, dragging a long splice of chocolate with him to the sides of his head. A bit gets on his sideburns. Levi grimaces, stepping back and away from the two, muttering something about hygiene. Eren just laughs, licking the chocolate at the corner of his mouth and instantly marvelling at the flavour. Chocolate was for people in Sina. Eren grew up having to hunt for firewood and sometimes even crops to bring home from the farms. This is luxury to him, and it tastes like pools of freedom.

More claps fill the air as Eren grabs the spoon from Hange and tries to replicate. He cries out when a hand grabs the collar of his shirt and drags him backwards. Levi tuts, grabbing the spoon from his hand and sending a glare Hange's way for the filth they've started. Eren brings a hand up to his cheek, wiping off the chocolate and licking it off of his fingers. Levi pales, but ignores it for his own sake.

Eren has the spoons confiscated from him, but apparently knives are not off-limits. He's made to cut the cake up into enough pieces for everyone, which is a challenge in itself. The cake is big— not ginormous, obviously, but it also isn't just some side-dish. It's about the width of his shoulders and long as his head, which is a behemoth of a cake for him, but apparently not for a crowd of a hundred-something. While it's also not multi-tiered, it has a set of two cakes stacked on top of one another with some cream holding them together, so with some difficulty, Eren manages to begin slicing the pieces up and undoing the layering.

He wishes Mikasa and Armin were here. He'd never let them go, no matter if they thought him a monster, a cruel deserter, a traitor. He'd give them as many slices, however big they wanted, just to get a glimpse of them, just to protect them with all his being. No matter if they avoided him like the plague, or if they tried to beat him senseless at every glance. He's strong, and he's trained, now— He could protect them. They just had to be here. They had to find him, but, no. He had to find them.

By the end of it, there are just enough slices to go around for everyone— A few thanked Eren for the effort but refused to have a piece—, and Eren's left with a cake-covered knife, ready for the licking. He glances around for Levi, wondering where the man had run off to, but upon the sight of no Captain and a hyperactive Hange running around the place, rampant with a chocolate covered spoon and face in tow, Eren takes his chance. Tongue flat on the steel, he drags it up to the tip of the blade.

The metal slices his muscle clean open, and before Eren can draw the knife away, his world goes dark.

'You have to avenge your mother, Eren.'

'Save Mikasa, and Armin. Protect them.'

'Eren, why are you crying?'

Mikasa..?

Eren blinks awake to a glistening river in front of him. His reflection stares back at him, and he looks younger, with less stress etched into his skin, an increased fire in his eyes. Reaching

up, he runs his hand down the side of his face, before startling, sitting back. Where is he?

Glancing around, Eren soaks in the familiar landscape, feeling his heart die in his chest. A warmth wraps around him, a dulled red scarf gentle and kind around his body, keeping him in place. For all his panic, and his dread of being back home, a home he lost so long ago, he feels he could lay down and sleep here forever. There's safety in the location on its lonesome, despite its abrupt ambiguity.

Tumbling onto his back, Eren lets the scarf bind him, staring up at the sky. Distantly, he hears the familiar cry of seagulls over yonder, to the bartering of the markets further down the cobblestone paths, the laughs and screams of children as they dart around. It's an ambience he thought he'd forgotten, a dusty book with writing beautiful enough picking it up again is as if reading it for the first time once more. He feels tears begin to sprout in his eyes. He wants to stay here.

‘Oi! Eren!’

Barely reacting, Eren tilts his head over to the side, the stones beneath his head digging into his skull like needles. He shudders at the feeling, growing cold in the scarf's embrace. With a pacified look, he watches Levi call to him from down the path, such an expression on his face that Eren's never seen before. It's a blend of raw, unadulterated panic, and confusion. But Captain always knows what's happening. He's always calm. Whatever happening must be freaking him out.

‘But I'm in Shiganshina,’ Eren murmurs to himself, turning to look at the sky again. ‘Nothing ever happens here.’

Why do I need to worry about the Scouts, anyway?

‘Eren! Are you there?!’ His voice is growing closer now, Levi moving further up the path. Eren watches him approach, watches the pebble jump out of the way with each of his steps, and frowns. Levi's expression morphs, his head whipping to the side for a second, as if seeing something horrid chasing him. *Like a titan*, the boy muses. ‘He's somewhere here, back up! Hold your arms! Eren!’

Interestingly enough, there's a conflict in Levi's eyes that forces Eren to look away, an odd sense of shame redirecting his attention to the sky.

It's endless, more endless than Shiganshina could ever be. The clouds pass by overhead with a swaying delicacy, like the smoke he'd seen from Hannes' cigars when the Garrison could get their hands on them. For all of Hannes' rancour and drunkenness, he was a good man when it counted. Eren always admired him for it, but he was always too bleary-eyed and mentally fogged to notice. He wonders, even if only for a second, if he had confessed what he thought aloud, would Hannes have fought the titan that ate his mother? Maybe. But he would've died too, probably. The Garrison were never trained to go hand-to-hand with titans. It'd be to put the beetle in front of the dog, the archer to swordsman. Hannes would've been eaten, followed soon by two terrified children, whose last memories would be nothing but horror. That titan would have eaten four people that day of the same circle.

Oluo jumps in from the sky, grabbing Levi's shoulder. His ODM is missing, and that piques Eren's curiosity. Like Levi, he has the same look of confused terror. 'Levi! Get away!'

Levi tears himself off of Oluo. 'No! We watched Eren—' He growls, clenching his fist.

The titan, which Hannes had run from, dragging Eren and Mikasa from their mother. The titan, who ate his mother and forced Eren to watch. The titan, whose smile Eren will never forget, a show of sadism in the most animalistic sense of the word. There had to be something in those eyes, condemning them to smile at every tragedy they strung along with them, collecting like shells on a beach.

A beach, leading to the sea. Armin always wanted to see the ocean. Wanted to taste salt that couldn't run out to greed. He remembers when Armin came running to Eren, right in the very spot he lays in, a glimmer in his eyes that spread to Eren's like wildfire. The boy had set sparks to dry bush, setting a forest fire ablaze.

"Burning water, land made of ice, infinite plains of sand? Imagine how big the outside world must be!"

But how was Armin going to do that..?

Oluo calls out, panicked, a chorus of four feet running over to him. Pebbles kick in his face as they come to a stop in front of him. Hands brace themselves on the scarf wrapping Eren's body. He looks over to the captain, mumbling a quiet noise, confused. 'Heichou? What're you doing?'

Levi startles, his hands releasing themselves of the scarf for a second. Something worth calling relief floods over his face, eyes glassy as they turn to Eren. 'Eren! Are you in there?'

Hange steps forward, grandly approaching. A blush is on their face gleaming in the way it always does when they're fascinated with one thing or another, often Eren's titan similarities.

'The titan is showing signs of recognition,' Hange mumbles to themselves, scratching their chin. Titan? What titan could ever make it into Shiganshina? It was his home, his entire world. The walls were indomitable, living before and past Eren. Eren wouldn't even know what a titan looks like.

Blond straw hair. Wide smile. Red stained teeth. Each strained wrinkle, embedded into Eren's mind, a branding. It stares at Eren in the darkness of his peripherals, but always whisks away when Eren whips his head to it. He'll never forget it, though.

Oluo, Levi, and Hange exchange looks before Hange nods, yelling to the air. Their voice is uncertain but it holds a steady faith. 'Eren, you must remain prone. We think you're in the nape somehow, so, we're going to cut you out.'

He feels a rumble at the back of his throat, like a foreboding beast's call. Hange's eyes glisten with fascination. Eren turns back to the sky, watching as the blue begins to drown in a muddy white, clouds threatening to weep over his form. Wind kisses him all over his exposed skin, an apology.

Hands reach for the scarf, and begin to pull. It feels like suction on his raw skin, drawing cries from his throat as warmth is ripped from him, all left being overwhelming heat. He doesn't want to leave, clutching onto the fabric as hands pull him from the scarf. It feels like his arms are being ripped off of his body, an extension of his being separated from him like a horsefly plucked off the stallion. He's not sure which is which, all he can comprehend is searing pain in his body, hands wrapped around him tight, the torture so agonising he sees stars in the void behind his eyes. It looks just like the sky, and he reaches out for it with shaking fingers.

Then arms wrap around him.

Eren blinks, bleary, his eyelids weighing down like boulders on his shoulders. He feels ethereal, ephemeral, floating through space with no real meaning, the arms around his body his only grounding rock. Would that make them the Earth? The Earth, of which so much he hasn't seen?

'Stand down,' A voice beside his ear yells, causing him to wince. Like clockwork, he lets his muscles relax. Eyes flicker to him before harshening, looking past his shoulder, ignoring his obedience. Eren lets out a weary, confused noise, exhausted. 'He's out of the titan. I said *stand down.*'

Petra's voice rings out like nails on chalkboard. Every feeling, every sensation, every noise feels amplified in Eren's head, a mess of senses that meld and squish him into a pulverised ball of flesh and bone. 'Captain! He turned into... *that*— in front of us! Look around you, he nearly killed people!'

It's then Eren begins to come into focus, looking down over Levi's shoulder. His skin is bare against the night sky. They stand on decay, a rotting corpse, flaking and steaming into the air, taking their sweat with it. Black hairs rot and shrivel, burning a foul smell that travels up Eren's nose and into his brain, and if anything, Eren imagines this is what it's like to be burnt alive. He and Levi sit on the open wound of something, something big and something unforgiving, heat shooting through their legs as they kneel upon it, even as it rots in front of them. Steam licks his bare body all over, causing his skin to tint pink.

'He's harmless,' Hange tries to ease, taking Eren by the armpits with a practiced amount of care that comes from taking a baby hog from its mother. 'I'm— I'm sure it was an accident. Did anyone get hurt?'

Hesitation rings out throughout the crowd. Eren puts all his energy into paying attention to the world around him. Swords upon swords glare back at him. Nothing in Eren's life would ever hurt as much as that moment, where he saw the ends of the blades of people he thought he trusted. People he, just moments ago, dedicated his heart to.

They all look terrified, staring down Eren with dread, like he'd have any more energy in him. He could barely keep his eyes open as is. Some blades are shaky whereas others are expectant, raised for the slaughter, prepared and steady. Eren hates to wonder whose hands belong to whose sword, so he scans the crowd for anyone unarmed.

Erwin's eyes meet his at the front of the crowd, shielded by the Levi Squad, and there's an expression their lips that Eren will never be able to decode.

'Stand down,' he orders, moving closer. He stops at the corpse, raising a hand to boiling skin, feeling the sensation. 'Real titan skin.' Looking up at Eren, he steels his gaze. 'Was that on purpose, Eren?'

'I-' Eren stutters, feeling tears come to his fatigued eyes, so tired and fogged up he can barely comprehend his own thoughts. 'I don't know. I didn't mean to- I'm sorry, I didn't even know I could- I'm sorry Commander-'

'You nearly killed my soldiers today,' Erwin continues, taking out his blades to climb up the arm, using them as hoists, 'and you injured three. Three of my soldiers, out of commission.' He leaves the blades planted in the arm as he walks on the steady back of what Eren now realises is a *titan*, and he grows impossibly more lost.

Levi steps between them, hasty and protective. 'He just said he didn't know he could do that. It was an accident- If anything, it was my fault that he couldn't've known earlier.'

Hange letting go of Eren makes him to drop to his knees on the rotting titan with concerning resignation. Oluo grabs him by the arm, to help him up, and Levi keeps his bare body shielded from too many eyes. Hange uneasily adds, 'we considered it to be a possibility, Commander, if the Colossal and Armoured titans were anything to go by, but we never got the opportunity to explore it.'

Erwin hums, deep and long, narrowing his eyes at Eren. 'How did you do it?'

'H..Huh?'

'Turn into a titan. How did you turn into a titan, Eren?'

Levi growls as Oluo shuffles forward. His hands tremble as he starts wrapping his cloak around the boy, buttoning the collar for him. 'He just said he *didn't know*-'

'Self-harm...' Eren trails off, feeling his stomach sink. 'And intent.'

Three pairs of eyes turn to him with shock, but all Eren can feel is increasingly nauseous, exhaustion and grief overcoming him. He came out from a titan. He's a titan. He's lived his whole life thinking he could just *heal* like a titan, but no, *he was one*. He was the very thing that killed his mother. He was the very thing that ruined thousands of the people's lives. His mind trails back to watching the Scout Regiment come back, all beaten and bloodied the day of the fall, and he feels dizzy.

Erwin looks to the other two, raising a brow, before focusing back on Eren. 'They said you never had an opportunity to explore your... nuances. How did you know those were the key, Eren?'

Eren turns his gaze to the corpse, hands tightly balled in his laps. 'I just... know.'

Tears begin to sprout again, and Eren squeezes his eyes tight, as if disillusioning himself even more will take him back to safety, the warmth of that scarf and the white noise of his home. He wants to go back. He wants to feel that comfort again. He wants Mikasa and Armin.

‘I’m sorry, Commander. I really don’t know how I know, or why, but I just *do*, and I hurt people because I don’t know things—’

Erwin holds up his hand. Eren stops speaking as if someone had taped his mouth shut. He keeps his eyes and head downcast, hoping that the abuse coming is enough to forever shun the monster from him. That would, of course, leave him a blank corpse.

‘Enough. Miche, Gunther— Get him dressed again and keep him in the cellar until we figure this out. The rest of you, clean up this mess. Not a word of this goes Top Brass until we know each and every detail.’ Levi lets out a noise of protest, affronted, but quietens when Erwin redirects his look to him. ‘Levi. Hange. Come with me.’

‘I think it’s high time we see if we can dig up more history about young Eren here.’

‘It’s such a shame. We were going to take him to Sina too.’ Hange frowns, turning their gaze to the floor as their horses trot along the regal brick paths of Wall Sina. ‘He would’ve been so excited to pass through Trost.’

Levi tuts. ‘It’s not his fault. He didn’t know he could do that. We had theorised it, and we were the fools who left him in the dark about our theories on *his* body.’

Erwin nods, slow and considering. ‘I really don’t want to have to do this to the boy. But him turning into a fifteen metre in a populated space, stumbling around and not in control of himself is too much of a risk. If it happened in Wall Sina, he’d be executed after all of us. We cannot bring him into civilisation until we know for a fact he is under control.’

As much as the three want to deny it, it was true. Eren was dead in the monarch's eyes— He'd lost all his earthly possessions when he was young and by proxy, the only remnants of him lay in the population management files in Wall Sina. Even then, those are untouched by years, all blood relatives dead or missing, exactly like him. Eren had become a ghost, forever unknown, forever permanent as another casualty of Shiganshina, another sad story with no depth to it. It's a dull, numbing idea, the Fall of Shiganshina. It's horror only hits once you hear it first-hand from a child.

(Erwin remembers something Eren had mentioned, a few months after his arrival. He drank his milk in silence, unable to sleep under nightmares, his eyes dim and downcast. Erwin offered to get him another cup of if, even if they had wavering supplies of milk, but Eren refused.

He told him, abruptly, *sometimes, I think the people who had gotten crushed by falling debris are more lucky than anyone who lived.*

Then the child stood, and went to bed without another word.)

Wall Sina is a clean place, as it had always been. The stone floors beneath their horse's hooves seem to feel polished, refined and cut to such perfection it seems unreal. People walk by in silence, a blissful ignorance, casting the hooded Scouts faint gazes of mild curiosity before returning to their disillusioned world of peace. Levi wouldn't be surprised if a majority of these stuffed pigs hadn't even heard of Shiganshina, a year later.

'Levi, watch yourself,' Erwin cautions, and it's the only sign that Levi had spoken his mind aloud.

When the archive building comes around, they walk inside with no resistance. The Military Police all straighten at the sight of Erwin Smith, but loosen and scowl at the sight of his co-captains trailing shortly after. It's a spiralling basement, each step's walls filled to the brim with scrolls of people, their history, everything significant about them. Levi notices, a few metres below ground, the scrolls seem to travel down in alphabetical order. He keeps his eyes on the sides of curled scrolls, until the step he hits marks J with a regal gold. Hange stops a step behind him.

'We're here,' He calls out when Erwin continues descending. 'Eren's file should be here.'

Erwin steps a few steps down, clenching his fists for a second before looking up at Levi. 'Eren won't be there. He's considered a lost face by the kingdom, so his old files are down even further.'

Levi and Hange exchange a look, before, reluctantly, the two begin to follow after their commander. It's so strange to hear about the boy they've raised as a lost face. Hange could draw Eren's face a hundred times over and only grow increasingly accurate until it'd appear like they've taken real life and placed it on a canvas. He's no lost face, he has passions and interests, and a smile that lights up a room, no matter how dull it seems. Levi reckons this is what it feels like, to be the family of a blank corpse, forever unidentified, forever brushed off as just tragic.

Solid flooring hits Levi's shoe with a dull thud. Coming to a stop, Hange and Levi look around the dimly illuminated hall, lined with more shelves. Rather than organise by name, they've organised by year. Erwin walks with them, watching each number rise with a held tension in their hearts, until they come to a stop in the year 845. The year of the fall. This shelf is the fullest out of any other Levi has seen. The amount of unnamed corpses or loved ones that had just never showed up after the fall amassed to a point where the scrolls had to be placed around the floor of the shelf, stacked against the surrounding wall.

Levi swallows, trying not to think of where Eren's entire being could be stuffed into this shelf. Hopefully, even if just by a false hope, alongside his mother's. Whether it be a final commemoration or a fatal omen, Levi would rather not dwell on it. It takes about an hour of shuffling through scrolls to finally find the right one. Levi feels sick each page. So many lives. So many intricacies. Birthdays, uncelebrated. Stories, untold. He wishes he could avenge them somehow, but it's all lost on him. It's Hange who eventually finds Eren's, holding it up with a triumphant laugh, moving close to the candlelight for a better read.

LAST NAME: Jaeger

GIVEN NAME: Eren

DATE OF BIRTH: 30.03.835, Shiganshina District, Wall Maria

SEX: Male

PARENTS: Jaeger, Grisha (FATHER) Jaeger, Carla (MOTHER)

AFFILIATED SIBLINGS: Ackermann, Mikasa (ADOPTIVE SISTER)

CURRENT RESIDENCE: Shiganshina District, Wall Maria

'Grisha Jaeger...' Erwin rubs his chin, deep in thought. 'I feel as though... I recognise the name.' Thinking on it for a few more moments, Erwin lights up, slapping his fist on his palm. 'He cured a massive plague that would have wiped out a few rural districts. No-one could figure out how he could create the compositions of his medicine.'

Levi peers into the shelf, cocking an eyebrow. He grabs out a scroll and peels it open, frowning at the name staring back at him.

LAST NAME: Jaeger

GIVEN NAME: Grisha

DATE OF BIRTH: 806, Unknown

SEX: Male

PARENTS: Kruger, Eren (FATHER) (NO KNOWN RECORDS)

AFFILIATED SIBLINGS: Jaeger, Faye (SISTER) (NO KNOWN RECORDS)

CURRENT RESIDENCE: Shiganshina District, Wall Maria

So this was the father Eren rarely spoke of. Levi glares down at it, before folding the paper up and stuffing it in his satchel for later. He turns his attention back to Erwin and Hange, who have turned Eren's identity file around, reading the page of writing at the back. Stepping forward, he peeks over Hange's arm to get a good read of the block of text. They read in silence, and if Erwin's startled expression is anything to go by, Levi already feels rationally nervous.

CRIMINAL HISTORY: Justifiable Second-Degree Homicide (2 Counts)

Eren Jaeger and Grisha Jaeger (Father) travelled outside of the Shiganshina District into Wall Maria to visit the Ackerman home in 844. Upon pushing the ajar entrance door open, Grisha reported meeting the bodies of two of the three Ackermans, Mikasa Ackerman's father and mother. These appeared to be second and third degree homicide respectively.

Exiting the home, Grisha Jaeger instructed Eren to remain outside while he retrieved the local Garrison, however Eren disobeyed, re-entering the home. He stole a kitchen knife from the kitchen counter, and traversed the home until he came upon three men holding Mikasa Ackerman captive. Details on how the murders transpired are faint, due to a lack of confession from both Eren Jaeger and Mikasa Ackerman, as well as a lack of witnesses.

One of the men was found with a stab wound to the chest, puncturing his lung and killing him seconds after the removal of the knife. The second man was found with numerous stab wounds to the face, chest, and stomach, done in repeated succession past rigour mortis. The last man had a stab wound travelling into his spine, paralysing him instantly. He was alive when Garrison arrived, however could no longer move.

The three men were later identified as three main proprietors of human trafficking from the Underground.

With refusal of confession from both children, age factoring into innocence, Grisha Jaeger's medical contribution to Wall Maria, and the conspiracy and wrongdoings of the victims, Eren Jaeger was pardoned for two counts of justifiable second degree homicide.

'Shit...' Levi snatches the paper to get a good read of the file himself, leaning into the words as if to make them any clearer. 'That brat never mentioned this..'

Hange inhales, keeping a positive attitude as always, despite the sweat creeping down their neck. 'A murderer of two, an adorable ball of energy, and a human-titan hybrid. Just where did Eren come from?' They laugh, waving the file off.

Erwin hums, his tone indecipherable. 'Prepare to ascend the stairs. There's one more person we have to visit today.'

Chapter 4: Onism

Chapter Summary

The awareness of how little of the world you'll experience.

Armin, Mikasa, and their living conditions. Eren, his history, and his following birthday.

Chapter Notes

more plot stuff. uhhhh honestly i wrote this all so long ago that i don't rightly remember what happens in each chapter...

I think a lot of this was just exploring different hypotheticals like "what if titans worked like this?"

Keith Shadis' house is in a state of utter disrepair when the three Scouts approach, hitching their horses on the soddy post outside the building. Its windows fog with layers of dust, years thick, and the paint peels on the side of the house, weeds climbing up the stone and creeping into all the crevices of the house, cruel thoughts weaving into an altruist's mind.

Erwin stares up at the home. He never knew Keith Shadis to be the most tidy person, especially not Levi-level of tidy, but he expected his previous commander to upkeep his home better than this. A scepticism grows in the embers of his chest, a telltale sign that something is wrong. Something is wrong, and very much unlike him, Erwin will not be able to fix it.

Stepping towards the front door, Erwin brushes a hand against the handle, smooth and cold from misuse. When his palm comes back layered in dust, dust so dark it looks like soot, Levi grimaces, glancing away to the windows. Hange had pushed their face against them, breathing into the pane, peering inside, though their efforts come back fruitless, the dust too settled, too thick on the glass to traverse through.

Quiet footsteps split the silence into two.

Spinning around, Erwin keeps his expression a carefully crafted neutral, eyes half-mast at whoever had chosen to approach. Levi and Hange back up, by his side, hands at their hips,

ready to pull out the concealed ODM gear from beneath their forest cloaks, guarded, two dogs ready to kill with just the word.

All that greets them, however, are two children staring at the three of them with puzzled looks.

The shortest one, with blond hair to his shoulders, stands at the front, blue eyes piercing enough to rival Erwin's own. His eyebrows twitch upwards at the sight of the three, as if merely looking at them had brought him back to days long gone, days he's surely too young to have had. On his frail body, his clothes are ragged, old and thin for his stature, dulled with years of use.

By his side is a girl slightly taller than him. With a crimson scarf consuming the bottom half of her head, and her black hair pooling out of its sides, the appearance of her face only comes through silver eyes. They're dimmed, a longing dullness Erwin has seen in far too many in recent years, hollowed and sunken from lack of sleep, food, or maybe both. His heart clenches for the children— They seem to be Eren's age. To think he was once like this, would have been like this, filthy and frail and far too knowing for their ages..

'Ehm..' The blond gestures to the home, tilting his head. 'What.. What are you doing?'

Levi shoves himself ahead of Erwin, flaunting his cloak with enough bravado to flash the silver gleam of his gear beneath. It seems to do the trick, shrinking the shorter into himself and furrowing the brow of the girl. 'None of your damn business. Run along before we get the Military Police on you for sneaking into Sina.'

The boy startles, eyes widening. 'Wait— We— Please don't do that, mister. We just—' Helplessly, he grabs the girl's rose pink cardigan, tugging it back behind him. She follows, but not without keeping that dead stare on Levi. 'No-one's lived there for a while now. Me and my sister, we're living in the place for now until we can get enough money to apply for space in the refugee camp.'

Erwin cocks a brow. 'They're charging helpless people to live in the camps?'

Hesitant, the boy stares at Erwin for the longest time, as if deciphering the intricacies of his face, before nodding. 'They say people should be getting on their feet by now. We have no guardian, so we get paid less than an adult would for labour and food.'

'So you're keeping in here and stealing from the rich until you can get back on your feet,' Hange mumbles, nodding. They turn to their partners, shrugging. 'I say it's fair.'

'Hold on—' Erwin cuts, placing a hand on Levi's shoulder, squeezing it enough to signal him to stand down. He has no doubt that Levi can call out a street-urchin pickpocket when he sees one— for it takes one to know one, after all—, but there's something so eccentric about the two of these children that Erwin can't help but to be curious. It's in his nature. 'Why are you two staying in Keith Shadis' home? Where is he?'

The boy purses his lips, fidgeting with the ends of his ratty jacket. 'We got here after the home was abandoned.'

'That doesn't explain shit,' Levi growls, narrowing his eyes at the girl. She stares right back, the subtle shift of her foot backwards and her hand wrapping around the boy's arm a telltale sign— They're getting ready to run. They think the three are a threat, and honestly, if Levi had been in her position, he would've assumed the same.

Waving his free hand around, the boy shakes his head. 'Sorry— It's just.. The man you said lived here— According to what I've heard from the locals— Keith Shadis—' Murmuring beneath his breath, the boy bows. 'He killed himself three months after the fall of Shiganshina.'

Time seems to hang in the air like dead weight. Erwin feels his breathing go still, so eerily still, he wonders for a moment if he's even alive anymore. Words punch out of his gut, slow and agonising. How? Why? Where? Why hadn't he stayed with the Scout Regiment? Erwin knew deep down, Shadis was a traumatised man, one that could never recover from his sins, but he'd never imagined— He'd never thought...

'He hung himself in his apartment and was found when his body began decomposing,' the boy continues, timid and shameful. 'It's the only reason no-one else has moved in. It's the only reason me and my sister can stay without having to worry about someone sneaking in.'

'Why?' Levi raises an eyebrow. 'He didn't leave a note?'

The boy looks up, squinting. 'He— He did. An envelope, about as heavy as a necklace. We didn't open it, swear. It said it was meant for Erwin Smith.' Narrowing his eyes further, the boy raises to his full height, turning to look at Erwin. 'Is that you?'

Erwin swallows, then nods. 'Can I have the note?'

Nodding, the boy hurries past the three— The girl never lingering far, her back turned to the boy yet not to the Scouts. Her eyes are particularly on Levi, and they never seem to leave him, even for a moment—, and withdraws a key from his pocket, clicking the door open. He glances back at the Scouts, then to his sister, before gesturing with his head to follow.

The home is a dusty and dark place. Things are exactly as Shadis last left it, spacious and homey. Portraits of family remain hung on the wall, as well as medals and badges. Erwin takes it all in— It's been a while since he's entered this home, but now it seems completely foreign. On the ceiling, a hook where the lantern would have gone hangs by a thread, the bricks surrounding it cracked and caving towards the hook. The cut off end of a rope hangs there. Erwin looks away.

'You brats didn't find the heart to clean?' Levi mutters, holding his handkerchief up to his nose. Erwin knows him well— The mere sight of his place must be settling under Levi's skin like a parasite, a reminder of where he had come from.

'Well—' The boy, moving over to one of the drawers on the far side of the room, sandwiched between two curtained windows, says, 'if anyone does come in, even if we're not here, a dusty place seems a lot more empty than a clean one. So we left it as it is.' Sniffing, he pauses in his attempt to find the note, wiping his nose with his arm. 'You get used to the dust after a while.'

Hange marvels, nodding. 'Smart! Dust is a sign that no-one's been around for a while, so thieves won't bother to search for anything!'

Levi clicks his tongue as the blond boy glances over, raising an eyebrow. 'We got that, four-eyes.'

Tugging on a stubborn handle, the boy pulls open a drawer with a grunt, peering inside. After a few moments of sifting through the items inside, most of which sound to be paper, he withdraws an envelope, turning around. The girl narrows her eyes at the envelope, and when the boy begins to approach, she grabs his arm.

She speaks for the first time, addressing the boy, 'Nothing comes for free. I don't care if they're heroes.' Her voice is a soft, dull thing, like the drag of an unsharpened knife against thick skin. Deep, there are echoes of longing, grief, that layer her throat with tears unshed.

The boy nods, turning back to the Scouts. His voice is afraid for a moment— The power imbalance is obvious between two ratty kids and a trio of trained soldiers—, before he steels his expression, holding the envelope in front of him. Clear as day, in Shadis' writing, the paper a bit yellowed, reads, *For Erwin Smith*.

'What're your conditions?' Erwin slips into his bartering mode easily.

He'd always been smart with his tongue, sharp with his mind. The combination of it made him a deadly foe when it came to words, and with children, it was easy to win them over. Promise them shelter. Promise them safety. Promise them love. He'd done it with Eren, and if anything, Eren should be making friends his own age by now. Of course, this makes Erwin an insincere person, pragmatic with each lie that slips through his silver tongue, but he learns to love, learns to care. He would defy the rest of the world if it meant protecting Eren. The kid has earned his respect over the year he's known him, and it's no easy feat, that.

'Money,' The girl speaks, her voice cutting like a sharpened blade, 'enough to last me and my brother a year.'

Hange raises an eyebrow. 'Why only a year? Why not ten? Why not ask us to shelter you?'

'It's none of your business,' the girl snaps, her brows dipping, shadowing her eyes. Hange holds their hands up by their head, digressing.

Erwin nods. 'Done. You'll have it.'

'And—' The boy cuts in again. 'This isn't a monetary request. But—' His expression dampens, the corners of his eyes beginning to swell with gloss, hands trembling as they hold the envelope. 'Me and my sister, we had a brother that was with us when Shiganshina fell. A few weeks after, we were in Trost, and he was taken. He was hot-headed and irrational and angry about everything, and he hasn't returned to us.'

Levi frowns. 'We don't kidnap children.'

'We're not asking you to kidnap him, wherever he may be,' the boy bites, his patience wearing thin, 'but— He really liked the Scout Regiment. He'd do anything to become apart of your forces.' Holding out the envelope again, the boy squeezes his eyes shut. 'We miss him, and we're terrified for him. We may be surviving for now, but he made sure we were living. If you could help us by calling out for him, or even asking around, he might— He might come back to us.'

Silence swallows the home whole. Erwin stares for the longest time, and before he can say anything, Levi cuts in, stepping forward. His voice is a carefully crafted neutrality, one that startles even Erwin. 'Who was he?'

The girl huffs, a fire beginning to spark in her eyes. 'You saw him the day the walls fell. He had the brightest green eyes and a wide smile and a determination that kept us going for days. We were bringing firewood back home from the rural areas.' Losing herself to her memories, the girl shakes her head, focusing once more.

'His name is Eren. Eren Jaeger.'

You could hear the faintest of breathing from stuttering hearts in that very moment. Hange and Levi look directly to Erwin, who looks at Levi with such a hardened gaze it's difficult to tell whether he was upset or so surprised his shock looped into anger. Regardless of the expression, or the tone behind it, Erwin and Levi exchanged one sentence, an unspoken flag for Levi to make the decision. Did they know Eren, the bright-eyed boy who'd been sleeping in their care for a year, or was he just another soul lost to trafficking, murder, or worse?

Levi turns back to the children. He stares at them, and his brain finally begins to form connections, faces put to names, traits put to evidence live in front of him. These were the two Eren always reminisced about, even in his nightmares. The two of them brought a comfort to him that Levi had only just begun to equate to. These two were Eren's saving graces.

'They were always the ones to drag me out of my head.'

'Mikasa's super strong, and Armin's really smart. It's better they've got each other. I don't want them to see me, not like this.'

Levi remembers his chest physically hurting at the words. He remembers consoling a boy who missed his mother, who missed the normalcy of life he had lost in a day. He remembers trying not to see his reflection in that soapy water, rather trying to see Eren's. He remembers the longing, Eren staring at the walls as if his friends would magically appear to take him away, back to his home, back to his mother.

'No. I don't know him.'

Armin's expression falls, but he nods regardless. It feels bizarre to connect such fond memories to such a sunken face. 'Okay. Will you still try to find him?'

Levi's lied countless times in his life, but strangely this one is one of the hardest ones. 'Of course. It's our duty to protect humanity.' Stepping forward, he takes the envelope from the

child, trying to ignore the despaired expressions, trying not to see himself in them. It was so long ago, yet he could recall each detail in that humid room like it was a reflection in the mirror. 'We'll get the money to this home by tomorrow. Keep safe until then.'

And without waiting for anyone else, or for another word, Levi turned on his heel and strode out of the house.

The cell was a familiar place for Eren Jaeger.

Not only had he been living here for two days already, but he had been put in here countless times. Sometimes it was for misbehaviour. Sometimes for trying to run away. Sometimes for turning into a titan and nearly killing the people who celebrated him.

Shame is a burning cesspit in his stomach. He doesn't want to confront it, nor the haphazard looks he gets from the Levi squad as they swap observation duty every now and then, eyes cautious and expressions disturbed. Because what eleven year old can turn into a fifteen metre titan with features of a man far beyond his years? None can. None, except for Eren, the freak of nature, the epitome of tragedy, the embodiment of dramatic irony.

The cell doors clang open, but Eren can't bring himself to uncurl from his ball of self-loathing. It's much different than the scarf. One is a knife wound plunging into his heart, torn out with a splatter of blood, and the other is a knife wound, slowly pulled out until he bleeds to his death. If he could.

'Hey, Eren.' The comforting voice of Moblit echoes through the basement, and Eren can already hear the placating smile on his lips. 'How are you feeling? Are you alright?'

Eren hums, keeping his eyes on the wall in front of him. His hands twitch above his head, bound and locked to shackles on the walls. There's little leeway— No-one wanted to risk self-harm when there was already so many reasons and intents. A hand rests on his leg, squeezing his calf reassuringly. Eren could melt into it if grief wasn't swallowing him whole.

'Commander Erwin, Captain Levi, and Hange are coming back from Wall Sina,' Moblit continues, trying to put aside the silence in favour of understanding. 'Once they're back, you can go and have a proper rest in the barracks with everyone else.'

The quiet stretches on like the shockwave from witnessing a corpse for the first time. Moblit swallows, taking in a deep breath with sweat building on his forehead. 'Do you want some of your cake? We can go get some more.'

'I don't want it.' And then, a gasp, a stifled sob slipped out through widening cracks. Moblit hesitates— He'd never been the one to deal with emotional outbursts, nor children in general. It had been Hange, always Hange, for they had a softer voice than Moblit ever could, a more

comforting gaze in their chaos than Moblit could ever have in his tranquility. 'I don't want it, I don't want—'

Moblit reaches forward to try and embrace the child, but all he receives in return is a glassy-eyed screech and a kick to the arm that has Eren pausing in his movements like a deer hearing a twig snap. His eyes go wide as he stares at the arm he'd kicked, processing, slow and gradual. Moblit surely didn't help by cradling the arm, though out of instinct.

Then the crying begins.

It's so easy to forget who Eren is, in the Scout Regiment. Everyday, he's the passionate and outgoing runt of the litter, young and naive however garnering more experience than anyone else in the headquarters. He's revolutionary to the human world, their first glimmer of hope that something could change in their bleak lives. He's the soft laugh of gentle breezes on outstretched fields, doting and careful, turning rough and biting at a moment's notice. He's the helping hand of a love you didn't even know was there, the easing furrow of the brow and the upturn of the lips beyond the mind's knowledge. He's the warmth of body contact that leaves one shivering when it's gone.

But in the end, it is so, so incredibly easy to forget that despite everything, Eren Jaeger is still just a kid.

His voice still has that childlike wonder to its pitch. His smile is still bright and full of baby teeth. His actions are still aggressive and impulsive, exactly like a kid's are. Because that's what Eren is— A kid. He's a kid without a mother, without a father, who had been taken from the last remaining things of his life before it all went to Hell. He's a kid who asks himself why the world had to choose him to be so important, rather than things Moblit had the privilege of wondering when he was a kid. To be without the knowledge that you are free is a blessing, Moblit realises, a blessing ripped from Eren's maturing hands too soon. Birds never figure how small their cage is until they soar in open skies.

'It's okay,' Moblit offers, lowering his arms, 'you didn't hurt me, Eren. It's okay, please don't cry.'

Eren chokes out a sob, his chest dry heaving. His instinct kicks in and he holds himself over the bed, wrists bound to the wall, away from Moblit— He'd had these panicked heaves before, and every single time Levi had drilled into his head that if a bucket were not available, to just do it on the floor, away from the things that could soak in the bile. He gags and tears stream down his face as his eyes go a blotchy red with strain, his shoulders shaking as his shirt begins to dampen with sweat. Moblit pats his back, rubbing it up and down as soothingly as he can manage, a pitying expression on his face.

He doesn't throw anything up— He hadn't eaten anything since two days back, never getting the opportunity to eat his own cake, and refusing it eat since then. These intermittent fasts happened, when raising Eren, another aspect of raising someone so troubled. Hange has yet to determine if the fasting was a titan issue or something provoking a sit-down discussion. Moblit tried to get him to eat— That was after Petra tried, before her Oluo, and before him Eld and Gunther. Miche cast a gaze in his direction while he was asleep from the aftershocks,

before any of them could even try, and shook his head. *"He's not going to eat,"* he said, *"don't bother until Captain comes back."* before walking away.

Eren collapses in the bed and now he seems even more exhausted than before. He doesn't bother to try and shirk the sweat-drenched shirt off, much to Levi's chagrin, Moblit imagines. His eyes meet Moblit's so the latter does what he thinks is right and gets to his feet. 'I'll wake you up again when they come back, okay?'

The boy nods, turning away with an empty look on his face. Moblit goes to walk out, taking one last solemn look at Eren Jaeger, before closing the cell door behind himself.

Erwin,

I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused you, handing Eren over to you in the midst of night. It was a selfish thing for me to do, but I don't regret it one bit. You know better than anyone when a man is something new, something revolutionary, and you saw that in Eren. You're not wrong.

I don't know the details, but Grisha Jaeger is a man of many questions. The reason I'm so attached to him is because he married the woman I loved, and had a wife. Seeing the last symbol of her being left out to die broke my heart, as I told you. But, more importantly than that, he had always been a strange case since the first day I met him. That would've been outside of Wall Maria, in titan territory. He was malnourished, dying and in dirty clothes, teary eyed and exhausted. He said he didn't know how he got outside the walls, and the only thing I could think of to explain why I'd come back from checking out the strange anomaly outside the walls with an entire person, was that he was dropped off by a gang of loan sharks.

Grisha Jaeger is not from within the walls. I'm not a fool, nor am I naive. He spoke differently to the rest of us— Our languages were similar, but his had a cadence to it that was otherworldly. He had different clothes that I had never seen, and he advanced medicine in a way that would've been impossible with the knowledge from our books alone. He is living proof that I believe, well and truly, solidifies the heretics' theories of life outside the walls. Your father would be clawing at the walls if he had known.

You must've figured out by the time you've read this that I was lying about how I found Eren. It was lying by omission. I did find him in Wall Rose, but I knew he was not alone. I saw him walk into a forest with his father, and trailed behind far enough to watch everything. That in itself is another lie. I did see the two walk into the forest. I saw tears streaming down Grisha's face as he pulled Eren along. The kid didn't know what was happening— Whatever occurred in that forest, he knew nothing of, yet suffered its consequences. What I did not see, nor here, was their discussion, their final words to each other, Grisha's final expression and his final action. What I was present for, though, was finding a key around an unconscious boy's neck

and the remains of his father's corpse, an arm. I buried it where I found it, took the key, and went all the way to see you with Eren in my arms.

Whatever Grisha was thinking, or feeling in that forest, might forever remain a mystery.

However, I imagine Eren must remember what words they exchanged and the actions they had taken. Whether he will tell you or not is entirely dependent on your treatment of him. I've heard of him through fellow Garrison members who were stationed in Shiganshina— He is a brash kid but he is resilient, and if anything, loyal. Show him you are worth being loyal to.

In this envelope is this letter, and the key. If anything, I assume it's to the basement of Eren's home that his mother always complained about being locked; Grisha was in there a majority of the time, and the fact that it was wrapped around Eren's neck solidifies my belief of which lock it belongs to. The home's been crushed, but there is faint chance for the basement to be intact. I'm sorry for the trouble this must have caused you. It was never your battle to fight, yet I pulled you to the front lines regardless.

I am forever indebted to your kindness, even in my passing.

Your friend,

Keith

When Eren awoke, there were three pairs of eyes on him and a paper in his lap.

Swallowing, stretching his shoulders as much as possible with his limited movement, he sits up and looks down at the paper. It's an old, yellowing thing, with writing distinct enough that Eren can peer and read through it. His stomach drops with each line. He knew it'd come to this eventually. The Scout Regiment was made to protect humanity. Eren was a threat exactly against that, before he'd even begun showing signs of being what he was. He had intentionally put it off until he was older, so he could flee to the other side of Wall Rose and never have to see them again, but they seemed to have found out first.

'Care to explain?' Levi pulls a chair over, dragging it across each cobblestone with a loud, tense clack, until it sits in front of Eren's bed. The Commander is the one who sits in it, however, while Levi makes himself comfortable on his bed. Hange stays by the cage, notebook in hand for whatever reasons.

Eren looks down at the paper. 'I think it explains everything, Heichou.'

He yelps as a hand sends his face flying to the side. Hange lets out an aborted gasp, but says nothing. Levi pulls out his handkerchief and wipes his hand, clicking his tongue in the way he always did when frustrated. 'Don't act smart with me, Jaeger. The hell is this? When were you going to tell us?'

'We're not mad,' Erwin supplies, ever the peacemaker. 'If what this report is saying is true, then you did a good thing. We just wanted to know why you would withhold something like that from us for the foreseeable future.'

Biting the inside of his lip, Eren mumbles, turning his gaze to his lap. His voice comes out small. 'I was going to tell you..'

Levi cuts him off with a snarl. 'Bullshit.'

Eren winces. He'd rarely ever seen Levi this upset at him, only when he was stupider and more reckless and running away more often. The last time he'd ever seen Levi like this was when he'd tried to escape by stealing Miche's cloak and running off into the night. Admittedly, he was still proud of that plan, but he should've really been thinking more before jumping out of the window and breaking his leg in the middle of the night. It was a miracle Hange had heard the snap, then the muffled screaming, and come to check it out— If they hadn't, Eren's sure his leg would've healed with his bone sticking out.

'I dunno, it was before and I didn't get in trouble for it,' Eren tries to reason, 'so I didn't think it was *that* important. It's not exactly like I'm the most lawful person, and no-one ever asked me.' Frowning, he stares down at the paper. 'And I didn't want those three men getting away with Mikasa. It was wrong. The law wouldn't get there fast enough, so I had to do something.' And now he's thinking about it, and the more he thinks about it, the angrier he begins to feel. 'Even if they did, those pigs would've made Mikasa *thank* them somehow.'

'Eren,' Erwin scolds. The boy bows his head and reluctantly spits out an apology, simply thankful the reprimand didn't come from Levi.

It is a dangerous combination, Erwin reckons, to have a man raised in the Underground, the very city of lawlessness, and a child, mistreated by that same government in a time of struggling, helping each other in their own eccentric ways. He always keeps the two in check when it comes down to the Military Police or the Garrison— Who knows when one day they'll slip up and make a comment that'll get them beat up, or worse, killed?

The Top Brass were powerful people— Power makes people cocky.

Hange finally perks up from the back, shoving the notebook and charcoal in their pocket. 'Also, interestingly enough, Eren, we had a look at your father's files.' Quirking their brow, they step forward, sneaking a hand in Levi's satchel for the paper. Levi jerks away, but relents to stop the paper from tearing at the movement. 'Who is he, Eren? All his file says is he's unknown. No criminal history, no birthplace, not even a birthday. Why is such a renowned doctor so unknown?'

Eren looks at the presented paper, leaning in. He hadn't even known his father had a sister, let alone such vague details. 'He always said he was born in Shiganshina, and his parents died to the same disease he tried to cure.'

'Where is he now?' Hange frowns, staring holes into the floor. 'He never showed up to Trost, or any of the warehouses after the fall. At least, legally he didn't— There's nothing of his name in the records.'

Trying to help out, a guilt weighing on him unjustly, Eren thinks hard and long. Closing his eyes and trying to remember, Eren focuses on the last times he had seen his father. He remembers— It feels like decades ago, honestly— that neutral look on his face, carefully crafted into a natural curiosity, nothing like the Commander's, whose look is stern and blank all the same. Eren recalls the dark brown strands flowing down to his shoulders, the way he had it always brushed back, never tied up— He always thought it was too constricting, that it made him appear too rowdy, too ready to fight. He was a healer, he didn't fight people. Little things like that, his father believed, hid him from his backstory best.

...How does Eren know that?

It's a similar feeling to when he had escaped the nape of the titan. He couldn't explain how he knew how to transform, or where he had learnt it if he'd allegedly never even known he *could* transform, but it felt like instinct, like knowing from birth how to lick chapped lips, or how to blink away tears. Eren knew what to do to get an action, but he couldn't explain how he knew to do it— It was inherent instinct.

Knowing how his father had thought, how he adjusted little traits in his life to camouflage himself, Eren felt the two of their brains melding together. He felt like thousands of memories were all rushing into his head at one time, flashing by his eyes so quickly he couldn't get a good look at them lest he wanted to miss the others flying by him.

Eren grits his teeth, trying to recall more. He recalls the morning of the fall, sitting at the table and eating breakfast— *Mum*, his mind helpfully supplies—, and he remembers the unchanging neutrality on his father's face as Mikasa ratted him out for wanting to join the Survey Corps. He remembers the gentle set down of his father's paper— Or was he holding a spoon?—, the tilt of his head, and the reflection of Eren in his glasses as he asked him,

'Eren, why do you want to go outside the walls?'

His mother had protested even further, but even Grisha was unshaken. Mikasa looked hopeless, knowing all three of the Jaegers were just as stubborn as one another, the force pushing the boulder down just as strong as the man pushing it upwards— They balanced each other out, toppling onto an impasse until either the floor beneath them broke or the force relented. Eren remembers the soft jingle of the key in his father's hand, as he turned to Eren, halfway out the door.

'Eren, when I return, I'll show you the basement that I've kept secret from you.'

And it was the last time Eren had ever seen his father.

'Are you sure?' Levi mumbles, drumming his fingers along his leg. At the tilt of Eren's head, Levi frowns, worrying his bottom lip for a moment before continuing. 'That was the last time you saw your father? Just like that, he left? You two didn't fight or anything?'

Eren thinks further, but ends up shaking his head. 'Dad never lost his composure. He was always really calm. Why?'

Levi thinks longer. 'The first night you were here, after you tried to run off for the first time.. You spoke in your sleep.'

The Captain remembers it well. Sat in the cell they remain in now, on the opposing side from the bed, simmering in his own rage, watching the kid go back and forth in his slumber. It wasn't a peaceful slumber, but it was slumber all the same, slumber that he robbed from Levi's men. He watched as Eren's brows dipped up and down that night, and contemplated waking him up. The sick part of him, the parasite lingering from the Underground, told him to let the child suffer, to let him toss and turn and wake up in fear of the next time he'd fall asleep. Levi almost relented to it, but his mind struck harsh with the thought of Isabel, and Farlan, how they'd suffered in their sleep too. Disgruntled, but merciful just this once, Levi stood up to go and find a bucket of water.

When he'd returned, Eren was drenched in sweat. He had tremours all over, strong and unrelenting, with a fever coming on— That is, at least, what Levi could make of it. Eren mumbled things in his sleep, with that tired voice, tears gathering unshed in the corners of his eyes.

"Dad, no."

"What's happening?"

"You're hurting me."

and, possibly the most alarming, *"What's that needle?"*

It was only when Eren began screaming did Levi pour that bucket over him and force himself to keep that ticked exterior for the night.

Eren looks like he's seen a ghost. He listens to Levi recount the story, and the memories flood back to him like flies to a body long since dead. That morning, watching him walk off into the distance, that was not his last time seeing his father. His last time seeing his father— It was outside of Trost. The forestry, the woods, all of it begins to come back to him like a gust of angry wind, slapping him in the face. He feels nauseous all of a sudden, his stomach churning as he delves deeper and deeper into the crevices of memories long since hidden from him.

The hair. It got caught between his teeth. Blood ran from the corners of his mouth like streams of drool in a sedated mouth. He was in a body that wasn't his, until he shrunk back into familiar skin, a new being sharing his consciousness. His eyes see the mouth of a gaping titan, a perpetually angry glare, shaking hands held in front of him, but at the same time he witnesses food, crying and screaming but food all the same, food that brought him back at the cost of his memories, his past, and his future.

Grisha Jaeger did not disappear. He did not disappear, not into thin granules of nothingness, he vanished. He vanished without a trace for he left no trace, none on the outside. All of it was in his son's mind, forced into the corners and hidden deep in the flesh and blood, engraved as a part of him. His face melding beneath Eren's skin, forcing a ghostly silhouette

of agony as it pushes outwards, screaming for help, a phantom presence only his son will feel.

Eren jerks over the edge of the bed and throws up.

The next year was full of gruelling training. Eren's schedule had completely shifted from human combat and ODM practice to concentrating on using the titan apparently within him.

He couldn't complain— The thought made him sick, but it was apart of his being now. If he wanted to loathe over himself, he could do it by putting the ability to use. Knowing his history, what he'd done, what had been sacrificed to give him his ability, he couldn't put to waste because of his own hatred for his reflection.

So Eren worked.

The first few trial errors, Hange stood roughly a hundred metres away and told Eren to transform. Eren tried— He really did—, but all he received in return were hands pull of bloody bite marks and an even guiltier consciousness. After the fact, Hange had adjusted training sessions to perhaps make transforming easier. They'd give him goals— Move this wagon to the headquarters, kick this tree down, all the things that Eren did with a body larger than him, alien yet completely familiar to him.

He hadn't gotten a good chance to hear about his titan, but from the looks he'd received from scouts he'd thought liked him, his titan was nothing friendly. Hange had shown him a sketch Moblit had fixed up in the few times Eren had been able to keep still, and Eren wholeheartedly understood the fear.

His titan— Even that term felt weird— was a fifteen metre tall hunk of muscle. With sharp angles and nothing else, he jut out as one of the few titans with definitive human-like anatomy— Muscles bulging from everywhere they should be, dark brown hair like his father's flowing to his shoulders, its roar a deep and humanly angered one, and an angular jaw with two sets of teeth.

That had been an interesting day, observing his teeth. Hange had him lay down on his stomach and keep his mouth open so they could observe the two sets of teeth. A crowd of Scouts had surrounded them that day, Eren recalls, around thirty. They all either came to watch the experiment, interested, or find a reason to kill the first human titan in history. Thankfully, though, a majority just ran their hands down Eren's arm, marvelling at a real titan so close.

It was weird, to be flat against the floor with his chin on his folded arms and completely still — It was something Eren didn't even do as a human, remain completely idle. He had the strongest urge to move, look around, or kick his legs, but Levi had made it clear the moment

he did something out of line, he'd be cut out faster than his body could fall. Eren didn't want to hinder Hange's experimentation. He felt bad enough being what he was as it was.

So, he lay dead still, looking as far down as he could with strain as they prodded around his molars with their head half-stuck in his mouth. They, not a complete fool, had lodged a sword between his upper and bottom molars at the hinge of his jaw, just as a precaution, but Eren knew deep that he could break it easily if he were to tense his jaw just a little. Such an odd sense of power, yet remain untouched, a fire sparking with nothing to feed on. Eren gave it all to Hange. He breathed through his nose so steam didn't burn Hange alive, but feeling them poke around his tongue, yelling about and drenching themselves in his saliva was gradually removing his inhibitions. Moblit had apparently trusted Eren enough to not eat Hange, and Eren exercised that right as much as possible.

An hour into holding his jaw still, Eren didn't feel himself. He had such the urge to bite down, to kill them with a singular movement. It was primal, aligned with the voice that occasionally rumbles deep at the back of his mind, a separate entity from Eren's human mind. He felt, and somewhat knew, it was his titan screaming at him, generations upon generations of his predecessors attempting to command him. His titan could never bend to their whim. Levi had sent him a wary glance at the picked up panting, moving over to his ear where he asked if Eren was alright. All Eren could do was blink at him, hoping it seemed confident enough.

The thoughts never left him, though. Just one movement. One step too far into his mouth, and what would happen wouldn't've been his fault. Between his teeth, Hange would pop like a pouch with too much water in it, a berry with ripened juice, staining Eren's face like gore. Warmth of blood and bone would melt over his tongue and he'd finally eat after so long. He'd be full. If he could just bite down.

In that moment, Eren knew he was done. Hange startled, legs swinging out of his mouth as Eren raised himself on his forearms. Several Scouts called out, surprised, and Levi had already wielded his swords. Eren grumbled, gently shaking his head— Hange squealed in delight at the noise, the action, the comprehension— as he balanced enough on an arm to rip them out of his mouth and onto the floor with care. It was just in time to avoid the snapping of his jaw and the flood of saliva dropping to the grass. He spat the broken blade out onto the floor, and tried to ignore the fearful looks of realisation dawning on his fellow soldiers. Hange had laughed, hysterical and proud of Eren for backing out before he had pushed himself too hard. Levi ripped him from his nape, whispering similar praises, but it did little to quell the disgust in Eren's mind. He hadn't eaten the rest of that day.

Anyhow.

Most notably of his titan, Hange had told him, were the eyes. They appeared to be a bigger version of Eren's up close, but from afar his eyebrows cast shadows, leaving just the dim glow of his eyes amidst the dark. Hange had guessed it could've been a way for Eren to see in the dark, seeing as he didn't follow regular titan sleeping patterns. It was all very interesting.

Throughout these experiments, Eren was getting better at embracing himself. He wasn't entirely sure what they'd end up using the titan for, but whatever it could be, they prepared for it. Cutting down trees, building homes— That'd been fun—, running long distances. Eren

had done just about it all. Even the rest of the Scouts, after a few weeks and observations that Eren did *not* turn into a mindless titan the moment he transformed, began to warm up, requesting of him favours only a titan could do. His favourite request so far had been a scout asking him to throw an embarrassing set of letters as far into the sky as he could. He, the immature kid he was, had had a great time narrating them to the Special Operations squad.

Before Eren had properly known it, he was twelve.

His titan ability came to him naturally by the next March 30th, two years since he'd arrived at the Scouts Headquarters and a year since he first became an actual titan. He began by biting the meat of his hand, but since had moved to slicing himself with the pocket knife Levi had gifted him a year prior— He always kept it strapped to his leg, like Levi had. The creases below his eyes that came with pulling himself from an extension of his being had become a little bit more than permanent, keeping faint pink lines on his face— They'd fade after a few hours of getting out of his titan, and Eren was beginning to get used to it.

Staring at the sky, midnight signalling the beginning of his birthday, Eren thought deep.

"I'm twelve now..," he thought to himself, arms spread out across the room of the headquarters, *"I'm old enough to join the military if I wanted. Means Mikasa and Armin are, too."* Frowning, he turned his gaze to the direction of the Wall, knowing well that the roof's stone fences were blocking his vision. *"Don't let them be stupid enough."*

He missed them everyday, though. There wasn't a single day that passed where Eren didn't long for them by his sides. He wonders how much they've changed. How much he's changed. He knows before he was a loud and aggressive kid who made stupid decisions, and according to the people around him, he hadn't changed a bit, save for the titan. Eren huffs to himself at that thought, amused. What would he know?

The door clicks open. Eren jumps up to his feet and his hands fly into a salute, ready to grovel and apologise for being up on the roof— It's usually not allowed at all. He's not exactly sure why, but he wouldn't be surprised if it had to do with the traumatised looks other scouts had when they came back from an expedition, leaving Eren to wonder alone, mentally counting how many had been eaten.

His posture relaxes when he sees Levi step outside, that perpetual frown etched onto his face. Eren offers a smile, trying to take his mind off the bad thoughts. He didn't want Levi to worry. 'Heichou.'

'It's filthy out here,' Levi says, wiping his hands down with his handkerchief as the door hovers ajar behind him. 'You were laying on the disgusting rocks alone?'

Eren smiles, shrugging. 'The sky is nice tonight. I was just.. taking it in. Thinking.'

Levi follows his gaze upwards, humming affirmatively. 'You're right. It's definitely something.' Looking back to the kid, Levi's expression softens, his eyes looking Eren up and down. He'd grown taller. His face was still a bit chubby, holding that baby fat, but it made Levi reminisce all the same. It reminds him of what he came here to do, and soon the

expression hardens once more. 'Even though you're twelve, Eren, you won't be needing to join the army.'

Eren quirks an eyebrow. 'It's the only way I can get a legal identity, though.' Military identities weren't exactly ideal for being considered an alive and well person, but it was the only option Eren had— Going back to reinstate his initial one would have raised questions as to where he'd been the past two years. It was already scandalous that the Scouts had housed a child— The government didn't even know he was alive, let alone that he was under the care of soldiers, that too as some human-titan abomination.

'That, I will explain tomorrow for your birthday.' Levi nods inside with his head, beckoning Eren to sleep. 'And wipe that shitty look off your face. You look like you're going to cry, and you know how I hate that face.'

The kid clicks his tongue, a habit he'd undeniably picked up from his superior. 'I think you just hate my face in general, Heichou.'

Levi scoffs, rolling his eyes, though there's amusement laced in the gunmetal gleam. 'I'm not agreeing or disagreeing. Now, go take a bath and go to bed. You have to be up early tomorrow.'

Eren's birthday doesn't hold as much bravado as it did last year, but Eren appreciates it nonetheless. He receives an influx of smiles and pats on the back and proud comments from Scouts who *"swear he was so tiny a few weeks ago!"*. Eren absorbs it all in, trying to push the affection towards laughter rather than tears. This year, he's been made another cake, courtesy of a few of the food-oriented Scouts, nothing as fancy as the last yet lovely all the same. Eren doesn't lick the knife though, which earns a few chuckles from Scouts brave enough to laugh, but he does manage to get Hange in the face unlike last year. Levi's disapproving glare is all the same. He walks off after the cake is cut and Eren doesn't see him after that.

Due to the lack of celebration like last year, the ordeal is over by midday and Eren's exhausted already. He's stretching his arms over his head and ready to lounge around as a man like him on his birthday deserves.

'But hang on there, little titan,' Hange beckons, hauling him up onto his very own horse, 'we still have our gift to give you.'

(Miche and Gunther had taken the time to teach him how to ride a horse in the past few months, before gifting him one of his own, one to take care of, name, and love all like his own pet. He named her Armika, and ignored the snickers from Oluo. She was a rowdy Grulla Blanket Appaloosa, who always tried to bite off the fingers of the other scouts, but she behaved with Eren. Hange said he might have a natural thing for horses, while Levi glanced away and walked off. Eren loves Armika, and even if she'd nearly nipped off more than a few fingers, she was a good girl.)

Eren, according to Hange, is not permitted to question the last surprise of the day. He gives the Commander a questioning look as he mounts his own horse, but Erwin sends him that same placated smile and nudges him along. Hange is already long gone, shooting off into the plains of Wall Rose.

So, biting his lower lip, Eren spurs on Armika, and races off after them.

They ride for a long while— Eventually, Hange's horse grows tired so they slow to a canter, moving alongside one another as they move up and down their saddles. It's been about thirty minutes of straight horse riding, and Eren's ass is beginning to bruise. He's good at horses, but it means nothing if he's not used to them. Erwin and Hange look as though they can keep riding for days.

'Why aren't I allowed to ask any questions?' Eren complains, lowering his hands to rest atop the saddle's horn, rein loose in his hands. 'What happens if I do?'

'You're asking questions right now,' Hange chuckles, turning to look at Eren. Eren huffs.

'I'm asking about the rule about asking about the gift, not the gift itself.'

Honestly, he's been theorising what it could be for ages. There's not much he wants, or has even made notion of wanting, and even then it's an even narrower list at what he could want that would constitute going all the way out here. Would they give him free use of the ODM gear? Feasible, if there were any trees around. Would they do some sort of special Scout ritual? Possible, but why wouldn't've they have done it when he first arrived, or last year? Was that the thing Levi wanted him to tell him last year, before he transformed?

Eren thinks about that moment often. *"I'll tell you after you cut the cake. Better get to it, brat."* He had spent weeks after that day agonising over what Levi could have possibly have wanted to tell him, but he never found out. Either he lost the courage the moment he had the captain's attention, he forgot, or sometimes he simply didn't care at all, wanting to forget the memory and hence the omens that came with it.

'Well,' Erwin drawls, 'for one, it's a surprise, and Hange here is not one to keep surprises with.' Hange lets out an offended noise, but says nothing to protest. 'And two, if you do continue to ask questions, Eren, we'll call the gift off and let you keep wondering. So isn't it better to keep your curiosity silent for the purpose of finding out with time?'

Somehow, that feels like Erwin trying to instill a message into Eren. Don't speak your mind the moment the thought comes to you, theorise once you have more information. Eren clicks his tongue, frowning down at the back of Armika's mane, spurring her on to move a little faster. Armika huffs, but at the prodding pat of Eren's hand on her neck, she relents and speeds up.

They ride for another thirty minutes, and Eren's moved to fully and constantly complaining. Erwin and Hange alike had tried to calm him, but the feeling of the saddle hitting his ass repeatedly for an hour at that point had done more harm than good. Eren threatens to walk the rest of the way back to headquarters, *"What the hell could be so important here?"*, and it's just as he's ready to follow through does he see a figure in the distance.

Levi.

He waits patiently beneath the shade of a tree, by a gentle stream of water as the three horses ride up to him. His own horse is hitched to the stump of the tree, grazing on the greenery

surrounding the sturdy roots. Eren hops off his horse and ties her up to a tree as quick as he can to hurry up to Levi, arms outstretched. He stops at the last moment, backing off, trying to ignore the prepared flinch back Levi had, a grimace on his face. Habit— He'd been born into a family full of physical comfort.

Hange and Erwin hop off their horses and leave them to graze as they step up besides Levi, all smiles. Erwin is the first to speak, sturdy hands guiding Eren to sit by the canal. The gravel digs into his tailbone, amused huffs filling the air as Eren lifts up his feet, unwilling to let his boots get wet. 'Eren. This tree is a very important place to all three of us. Do you know why that is?'

Hange begins taking off their boots, so Eren, with an unsure glance at Levi, follows, placing them besides him. 'Uh...' He'd never really heard of any special trees from any of the three in his two years here, so he shakes his head. 'Why's it so important?'

Dipping their feet in the water, Hange splashes around, testing the temperature, before submerging themselves up to their knees. Eren, hesitating but for no more than a second, follows after, shivering at the feeling of cold water swooping past his bare limbs. Levi sighs, shaking his head. Hange tells him, 'We at the Scout Regiment have a tradition for rookies who joined our ranks unconventionally, Eren. You're the fourth one to go through this. What we do, is we take them to this stream, and we—'

Eren barely gets a second to react before hands are grabbing at his neck and shoving him into the water. His first instinct is to scream into the cold, bubbles crawling up the sides of his head and into his ears. He feels his hands reach up to claw at the offender. His second instinct is to reach for his knife, before he's taken out of the water with a loud gasp, his entire body sopping wet.

Shivering, sitting in the water, Eren turns around to face Hange, an indescribable look of betrayal etched into his features. Hange snorts, tossing their head back and laughing into the bright sky, joined in by the muffled chuckling of his Commander. To that, he looks impossibly more hurt, an expression Erwin has to turn away from lest he laughs even harder.

Levi smiles, leaning against the tree. 'They say it's to wash away the official nonsense of it. All the legality, the knighting..' Hopping off, removing himself from the shade, Levi peers over Eren in the stream, staring down at him. Eren can't find it in himself to get up. 'But we're doing it a little different this time.'

Reaching behind him, Levi pulls out a parchment of paper, scanning through it before turning it around for Eren to read. He has to peer to get a good read of the fine print, but he understands it well enough.

OFFICIAL BIRTH CERTIFICATE

LAST NAME: Jaeger

GIVEN NAME: Eren

DATE OF BIRTH: 30.03.835, Shiganshina District, Wall Maria

SEX: Male

PARENTS: Jaeger, Grisha (FATHER) Jaeger, Carla (MOTHER)

AFFILIATED SIBLINGS: Ackermann, Mikasa (ADOPTIVE SISTER)

CURRENT RESIDENCE: Survey Corps Headquarters, Wall Rose

Eren's eyes loop back over the last line so frequently he's sure he's hallucinating. He's not entirely sure what to be saying. The three scouts watch his expression carefully, waiting for a reaction. It begins to dawn on him, the paper, the significance of it. Legally he's alive. Legally, he's someone. Legally, he's living with the people who have raised him. Each time he re-reads the line, the writing gets blurrier and blurrier.

'H—How..?'

'I pulled a few strings,' Erwin explains, and says nothing more.

Hange hauls him up to his feet with a bright smile, slapping their hand on his back. He just cries, wiping his eyes with wet sleeves as he turns his gaze to the water rushing past his feet. Though he hates to cry, somehow, just this time, he feels it's alright. Their arms envelope him tighter than they ever had before, and it forces more sobs from him, gratitude leaking from him like a faulty bucket.

Erwin smiles, wrapping Eren in his coat. 'Welcome to the Survey Corps, Eren.' Helping him out of the water, Erwin stands back, Levi and Hange standing behind him. Eren looks at them through his tears, snivelling and whimpering like a child all over again, clutching the cloak tight to his chest. 'Now, dedicate your heart.'

Eren slams his fist into his chest with a similar cry.

One last surprise. Eren wasn't entirely sure how today could get any better, wiping at his eyes and trying to blink away the redness as they trot through Trost. He scans the crowd for any familiar face, though the eyes of poverty and grief weigh him down like bags of sand. Their eyes are lost on him, and for a moment, he fears he's forgotten them. But no, for as long as he'll ever live, he won't ever forget their faces. They've probably just been elsewhere.

They stop by the warehouses he'd kept in for a few weeks before he'd gotten to the Scouts. It's a desolate place, no less miserable than it was before. He gives a few coins to a mother in crutches with her two children huddling at her bandaged legs, and she ruffles his hair with tears in her aged eyes. Eren feels weird looking at her. He could've been this family.

Strangely enough, Levi tells him the trip isn't to see where he'd come from, no. They were heading further into the walls. Further into the interior.

'There's someone we want you to meet,' Erwin explains, 'Some *people*, truthfully.'

Eren had never been in Wall Sina before. He could recall memories, through his father's eyes, so nothing comes as a complete surprise, but even then seeing things with the hands, voice, and thoughts of his father feels like a gross intrusion. Eren feels nauseous even thinking about it, so he keeps himself distracted with thoughts of how polished it is in the interior.

A golden cage a voice deep within him screams, and he's not sure whether it was his voice or someone else's. He feels his father's predecessor within him scowl at the walls, and concludes it must be him. Eren pushes the voice to the back of his head. What would a foreigner like him know?

They keep moving until Erwin halts them all to a stop outside this home— Decaying and unkempt, a complete eyesore compared to every other building in this place. It's a home of Shiganshina in the middle of Wall Sina. Eren feels oddly drawn to it— His father has been here before. Eren brushes off the uneasy feeling that creeps up his limbs, lingering on the sore spot on his arm. Absentmindedly, he scratches at the crook of his elbow as he watches Erwin attempt the door handle, only stopping when Levi pulls his hand away from himself. The light blue splotch on his arm never fades.

The handle rattles, however remains unmoving. Eren cocks an eyebrow, turning to Hange, then to Levi, both at either side of him. He knows he wasn't supposed to question it, but he feels his feathers begin to ruffle as he pictures what may be beyond his cage, a tentative squawk erupting from him. 'Commander..? Are you sure this man is home?'

He eyes the dusted windows, how they almost seem to be a film, masking the inside, and grimaces. Eren had always been a bit of a dirty kid, not above getting himself muddled up if it meant either having fun or getting what he wanted, but two years of living with someone like Levi who would wash the grime from his bones if he could instilled a sense of paranoia into him. Eren didn't even live in this home, and he felt tempted to clean it up before Levi had to head inside and scold him for a place he didn't own.

'The man doesn't live here anymore,' Levi mumbles, crossing his arms as he watches Erwin fruitlessly try the handle again. 'It's the squatters living inside we want you to meet.'

Eren bristles at that, giving his captain a half-assed smile and a glare hidden behind his eyes. He'd always hated being forcedly confronted with what could've been reality for him had he not been given over to the Scouts. It made him feel bad, indebted in a way that he was, of course, however did not want to acknowledge head-on, refusing to read the end to a story that he already knows. 'You wanted to show me what I could've looked like if you hadn't come and saved me on your white horse, Captain?'

He's rewarded with a smack upside the head that leaves his vision spinning for a few seconds. Hange snorts, rubbing Eren's shoulder as repentance for Levi's cruel and violent abuse. Eren smartly keeps his mouth shut and continues watching Erwin scowl at the handle.

Eren would never admit it, but out of the three soldiers, he was the one who squeaked when Erwin reeled his foot back and kicked the door open.

It flings backwards with such force that a cloud of dust leaks out from the frame like an open wound, settling in the gentle breeze. Erwin waves his hand back and forth, raising his cloak to cover his mouth, and steps inside with a wave of his hand. Eren looks between Levi—Who'd already tied a mask around his face—and Hange, searching for some semblance of alarm. They were *breaking into someone's home*. Not only that, it was a squatter's home, and Eren should know better than anyone that people with no home or clearly no sense of self-preservation have nothing to lose when it comes to protecting what little they have.

Levi gently nudges the small of Eren's back forward. Eren, following the footsteps of his Commander, grabs the collar of his cloak and raises it to his nose, moving inside.

It's a dark place that has Eren stumbling around for a few moments while his eyes adjust to the lack of sunlight. Dust hangs in the air like corpses, stale and stagnant, shifting around Eren, like the muscles of a titan's throat swallowing him whole. It's all claustrophobic. He manages to make out Erwin standing by a dresser on the far end of the home, staring down at a piece of paper in his hands, his makeshift mask forgotten. Eren glances around, and while the thought is hysteric, he can't help but ask,

'Am I being sold off?' His limbs grew back fast when he had the energy for it, and the Underground isn't exactly above anything when it came to what once was the meat they ate. Eren shivers.

He receives another smack for it, with a curse from Levi. 'Moron! What makes you think we'd ever do that after putting up with you for two years?'

Clicking his tongue, Levi shoves past Eren and makes his way over to Erwin, scanning the place with his eyes as Hange plays distraction, discussing home interior with such fascination he can see Eren begin to be excited by the idea of how support beams work. The place is even filthier than when they had come a year ago—Far past what should be possible to live in. The air here was still and marinated when they arrived, something that should be manifesting parasites by now. With no kids, this entire trip was a waste, and would only serve to freak Eren out. He's already having weird ideas, ideas that Levi will be needing to address with him soon.

'Where are they?' Levi mumbles, looking past Erwin's arm to the letter in his hands. The commander holds it out for him to take, which he does without question, shielding it from Eren with his body.

Dear Uncle Smith,

Thank you for the money for me and my sister! We made sure to put it to good use. Now that me and my sister are both old enough to be joining the military, we'll be leaving this home for the next person who needs a roof over their heads, and heading to camp the moment my sister

turns old enough, in February. We might even be able to join your regiment, so be on the lookout for us!

I hope you've managed to make some kind of progress with our brother— He's temperamental at best, but he's important to all of us. Even if he's not with you, or if he's dead and buried, we just want to know what happened to him.

Love,

Nephew and Niece

Levi looks down at the paper, scrunching the corners in his hands. Erwin waits for him to say something, gauging his reaction, however after a few seconds of prolonged silence, he sighs, placing a hand on Levi's shoulder. It's grounding enough for Levi to pull himself from his thoughts and turn around, stuffing the letter into his satchel. Hange and Eren turn to look at the two from their discussion on windowsill placement, curious looks on either face. They ask different questions from the same words. *Where are they?*

'Not here,' Levi huffs out, shaking his head as he shuffles to the door. 'They moved on, but we might be able to run into them soon. Let's head out.'

'What?' Eren whines, that ridiculous scowl on his face that he's always had since Levi's known him. 'We came all the way to Sina, and now we're leaving?'

The captain pauses, placing a hand on the front door's handle. He gives Eren another few seconds to rethink himself, and when no apology comes, he turns, facing the teen. The teen visibly stiffens, lowering his head and placing his hands behind his back. 'Jaeger. Let's head out.'

Hange and Erwin look towards Eren, no opposition in their eyes at all. Eren huffs, mumbling a, yes, *Heichou*, before moving out of the door, past Levi. Erwin offers the teen an apologetic glance as he spots him mounting his horse out of the window. 'He's excited to be in Sina. There are luxuries here he'd never even imagined.'

'He can imagine them when he's older,' Levi protests, and he's no sooner out the door than Eren.

After his twelfth birthday, Eren's training had shifted slightly.

While he performed experiments with Hange before, they had moved from physical experiments to biological ones. Hange wanted to test the chemistry between human and titan, titan and human. Eren didn't have an issue with this— He could heal, he could come back

from whatever Hange would inject into him with a promise for science's progression. The latter was a little afraid of needles, seeing as a needle is what essentially turned his life upside down, but he could deal with it. Levi, on the other hand, had a strong say in what Hange could and couldn't do with Eren.

The first time Hange had suggested playing around with Eren's body chemistry, Levi was already dragging him out before they could finish their sentence. As if punishing Eren for Hange's audacity, he made him run laps around the headquarters until he fainted. It's a punishment he was familiar with, yet disliked all the same. Why was *he* being put through this if it were Hange's idea? He hadn't even shown his approval or disapproval.

Eren would later learn running himself into the ground with exhaustion was a tactic to avoid being experimented on.

It had taken a couple months of persuading and more stamina building as Scouts laughed at him for his *"unspeakable crime"* which had *"forced Captain Levi to make him run burrows into the ground"*, but it came to a head when Erwin had taken it upon himself to intervene.

He'd pulled Levi aside while Eren was running laps in the courtyard with two buckets of water on either shoulder, mounted on a stick, and spoke with him in solitude in the easing shade, away from the burning sun. Eren envied them, sparing them a bleary pant as he trudged forward, his knees trembling. The moment Eren would slow down, believing himself safe with Levi's attention ripped from him, Levi would somehow sense his silence and order him to run five more laps as punishment for not completing one. Eren had lost count on how many he had owed Captain to run, anyway, so he just kept on running aimlessly.

After their talk, though, it was Erwin to step out into the sun and Levi to remain back, scowling at both Scouts. Erwin gently braced his hand on Eren's shoulder, causing him to stumble to a stop, water splashing in the two buckets, and took the stick from him. He lifted it with more ease than Eren had at full strength, but the teen didn't care. Eren, with the weight gone, immediately fell to his knees, spitting bile and sweat into the dry soil beneath him. Erwin said nothing, and splashed a bucket over his head— The shifter couldn't even be mad; rather, he sort of wished Erwin had poured the other one too.

'I spoke with Levi,' Erwin had said, kneeling down to Eren, 'and we've agreed to halt this training of yours for the time being. Instead, I want you to focus on learning how your biology works with Hange, Eren.'

Eren spoke between stolen breaths. 'Yes— Commander.'

Erwin stared at him for the longest moment, before humming, pleased. It was uncommon but not a miracle to receive Erwin's praise, but compliments from a man with a rank like himself was worth it all the same. 'Good work, Eren. You're very resilient. Take a bath and have a rest for today— I relieve you of your chores.'

Eren would laugh if he weren't too busy fighting for air, the thought of Oluo scowling at him while doing his work. Levi didn't seem pleased at all, but Erwin had pulled rank, so he had no choice but to agree. He fought to be in participation though, as a contingency, and for that Erwin could not fight him on.

'To separate Levi from Eren would be to rip a shoat from the sow,' He told the Special Operations squad later that night, while Levi helped settle the twelve-year-old into bed.

With that, the next week, Eren found himself sitting in the medic, dangling his feet over the bed as Hange ran standard procedures on him. They had him follow a match stick with his eyes, stick out his tongue to inspect his throat, hit his knee to test his reflexes. Eren found it all very boring, but Levi was intent on watching each and every single one of Hange's movements. He really couldn't understand why he was so against something so juvenile. Even Moblit could have been in Eren's position, and Moblit was afraid of the doctors. Ironical, considering his captain was the regiment doctor.

The only interesting thing that had stuck out to him was when Hange had lifted a tiny incision blade and ordered Eren to hold out his wrist. Eren did so, letting Hange feel his pulse as they made a small cut on his hand. Whatever they felt as his cut healed, they seemed satisfied. They then ordered Eren to crane his neck forward, exposing his nape. Eren, feeling that odd sensation of panic rising on his skin, followed, keeping his fists tight against the bed. Hange hold onto his wrist, thumb pressed against his vein. The moment the blade hit his nape, it hurt infinitely worse than any blade had ever hurt. But he was a big boy, a tough soldier, so he grit and bore it until Hange pulled away.

'A way more frantic heartbeat when the blade hit his nape— I think its his titan sense trying to escape the threat of danger.' And Hange had apologised, ruffling his hair.

He sat on the bed as Hange scribbled down their observations. 'It's remarkable— His heart rate accelerates when there is light in his eyes, as if his body were trying to wake up in the sunlight like a titan. Covering his eyes visibly eases him, and makes him slightly more sluggish. His tongue is longer than that of a human's, and his saliva is slightly glutinous— Look!'

They thrust the stick that they'd kept on his tongue earlier to Moblit, who grimaced and backed up. Even Eren regarded it with a foul look, disliking the information that the slime had come from him. The assistant stared at the clear spit with apparent interest though— It did in fact look sticky, even slightly clumped together. They'd observed it together countless times in their own titans, and Eren's saliva appeared no different. Levi avoided looking at it completely, clicking his tongue as he kicked at the floor.

'His reflexes come into function before the hammer even hits his skin,' Hange continued, dropping the stick into a glass tube. 'It's like—Ah... an alarm, of sorts. It detects harm against it a moment before it contacts and it causes his body to react before anything can even hit him. Fascinating. It's as if he's earned the traits of a titan, and his titan has earned the traits of a human.'

Hange glanced back over to Eren, who tilted his head, having zoned out the past fifteen minutes. He was bored out of his mind, and even entertaining going to run laps again if it meant something interesting to do. 'I wonder if we can enhance those skills— Have his eyes glow so he can see in the dark, or let out deafening noises that make the ground shake?'

'I doubt he can do that, Section Commander,' Moblit mumbled, casting Eren a sympathetic glimpse. 'We have to remember that a fifteen metre and a twelve year old are two very

different things—'

'You're right,' Hange whispered, tapping their chin. 'Maybe—' They let out a loud laugh, gently hitting their forehead. 'Of course! I've been looking at this too linear. I've been assuming Eren and his titan are two different entities. They're the same person, just different formation!' Spinning around and dashing to their equipment table, Hange clattered around. 'I wonder— I wonder if their blood is the same? If we give Eren his titan's blood and vice versa, would anything happen?'

Levi scowled. 'Oi. Titan-shifter or not, Eren is still human. Injecting foreign blood into anyone's system can kill them, Four-Eyes.'

'I know, I know, but that brings the question—' Hange stood upright, wielding a needle. Eren swallowed at the sight, rubbing idly at the blue path on the crook of his elbow, a given birthmark he'd never wanted. 'Can Eren then expel it faster from his system? Can his self-healing deal with internal issues, or is it just external?'

Turning to Eren, the doctor began to approach. Eren could see his own trembling expression in the reflection of their glasses, the way he shrunk and leaned further away from them, resting against the bed. Hange stared at him for a moment, before their smile faded. A clarity dawned in their eyes, reminding them that despite whatever Eren could do as a titan, he was still just a little kid. 'Ah.. Sorry. I must be freaking you out, Eren.'

Waiting for an answer, Eren softly nodded. Hange follows suit, taking in a deep breath that straightens their spine. A new wave of energy flowed through them. 'Worry now, little titan! I won't do anything that will get you killed, or me killed. You're in safe hands— The moment you don't want to do something, you tell me, okay?' Eren nodded again. 'Alright. Can you hold out your arm for me?'

Eren paused, feeling slightly guilty as he contemplated his answer. '..No.'

Hange lurched forward with the needle, before catching themselves. They stared at Eren for a moment, clearly confused, perhaps even a little peeved if the expression were possible for them, before sighing, pushing their glasses to their head. It brushed their hair back and revealed their expression in full earnest. 'What's wrong? Are you scared of the needle? It'll just be a little pinch, and then you'll be done. No more after that.'

Weary, Eren looked over to Levi for help. Levi returned it tenfold, confused as Hange, reminding Eren that even if they knew each other well, they could not read one another's minds. So, pathetically, Eren had to reach his free hand out for his Captain, a pleading expression on his face. He didn't want to do this. He never wanted to see another needle in his life. But this was for humanity, this was for people like his mother who could never live to see survival. This was for Mikasa and Armin, and if he ever wanted to protect them, he needed to do things he didn't want to. It was a duty written in his blood, both a boding and a messily scrawled lament on cold stone. A duty passed down from human to human, changing them each time, irreparably.

Levi stepped forward, and grabbed Eren's hand. His grip was firm, encompassing Eren's, callous skin gritting over smooth palms. He ran his thumb up and down the back of the kid's

knuckles. They're thin, fragile, too delicate for hands like Levi's. Eren comforted in the notion, keeping his eyes downcast on their hands as Hange set themselves up. 'Eren. Can you tell me about the history of titans?'

Eren frowned, shaking his head. He seemed angry that Levi had even suggested a pop quiz atop already getting his blood drawn. Replying with a pout, taking little notice of Hange pouring a little alcohol over his arm, he said, 'I don't wanna.'

Levi threatened to loosen his grip promptly, but Eren was faster, his tiny fingers holding on tight to the three fingers he could grasp with a full palm. He cried out, jostling a little. Thankfully, Hange hadn't been inserting the needle. 'Eren, I need you to hold still, okay?'

Eren huffed, keeping his fingers wrapped around Levi's. 'Don't go.' And with a little deliberation, he whispered, 'Please?'

And as endeared as the captain is, he shook his head. 'You wanted my help, you're getting it,' Levi retorted, frowning. 'I'm not repeating myself again. What's the history of titans? If you can't tell me, you can expect to take another lap or two around the headquarters again.'

Throwing his head back, the kid cried out, angry. Hange sighed, repeating their previous request with a little bit more exasperation in their voice, grabbing the syringe. Eren looked down to Levi, frowning, frustrated tears beginning to bead in his bright eyes. Levi wasn't, and isn't, weak to the glare, nor the crying, simply raising an eyebrow. He wasn't going to repeat himself, he meant it when he said it. Any other Scout would have bent backwards by Eren's first protest, but Levi is his guardian. He knows to draw a fine line between letting things slide and pure enabling. Either Eren could have done this alone, or he could listen to Levi.

And Eren hates to be alone.

Eren growled, as if sensing Levi's rejection, his other fist squeezing as the needle dug into his elbow, beginning to fill. 'Fine! I'm gonna get a bunch of stuff wrong, though.'

'Is that why you didn't want to do it?' Moblit idly questioned, hovering near the back. Eren glanced away, worrying his bottom lip.

The captain let out a long breath, shaking his head. 'Eren. Just try your best. We only went over this one time. I have high expectations, not unrealistic ones.'

To that the boy huffed once more, clearly drawing out his thoughts. This lasted for another few seconds, before he nodded, wiping his tears on his shoulder. Slowly, hesitantly, as if each wrong word would harm him more than the last, building up a debt, he began to mumble a vague outline. It was mostly wrong, some few things slightly, very distantly correct with how he phrased it, but it was an honest and compliant attempt. That's all Levi had asked of him, and he had received. Eren began talking at a smoother flow about it once he had gotten used to the sting in his arm, clearly making things up on occasion and casting Levi a glance like he wouldn't notice, but he relaxed more and more.

He didn't even realise it when Hange pulls away, two glass tubes full of crimson.

A small wisp of steam prevented any more blood from spilling down his arm, and he stared at it as if it were a completely new limb. Levi released his hand, raising it to ruffle his hair. 'Good work, Eren.'

Eren turned to look at him, and his eyes were as bright as the sun's.

They're considerably dimmed two days later.

Hange had him transform into a titan a day after his blood was drawn, and they took out some of the giant's blood as well. It went relatively more smooth than it had before, partially because Eren had recounted that he hadn't even noticed when the needle entered and left his titan skin. He had been distracted trying to pick flowers in his large fingers without crushing them.

A day after that, Hange had inserted the titan blood into Eren's, and made him promise to keep on writing down any change he felt. Anything, no matter how small, no matter how irrelevant it seems. Levi also kept watch, because he knew any negative reaction would have Jaeger blaming himself and not the foreign blood inside of him.

The first hour with the blood, Eren seemed to be doing fine. He said he felt more energised, more alive, like his blood was thrumming faster beneath his skin. His stamina increased significantly, and he didn't eat as much during dinner. Eren had said he wasn't hungry, and had gracefully donated his half-eaten bread roll to Hange, who watched him, rapt.

The second hour, his energy levels had decreased. Sun had set. There was a visible exhaustion dawning in his eyes although he refused to acknowledge it. When Hange had tested his reflexes, he was slower to react and even slower to move. It wasn't enough to be noticeable by anyone who wasn't aware what was happening to him, but it was enough to worry the Special Operations, especially since Eren had been so hyper just a moment ago.

The third hour, he started to shake. He had violent tremours, to the point where he couldn't steadily hold anything. His fine motor skills had sunk down to hell, and he couldn't focus on a singular moving object for longer than a few seconds, his vision blurring in and out of attention, his body swaying. Reflexes were noticeably slower, to the point where Eld had approached Captain after everyone had gotten ready to sleep, asking if Eren was alright. Levi told him it was a sugar crash, and not to worry about it.

The fourth hour, Eren told them he was hungry. Levi offered a bread roll left over from breakfast, but Eren had refused it. He was never one to refuse food, the last person, actually, so him turning away at the sight of the bread roll left the Captain stunned.

Five hours in, and Moblit, Hange, and Levi were discussing the situation in the medic while Eren lay on the bed, drifting in and out of sleep. The night had come high, shadowing everyone in intense cuts of light and dark. His healing wasn't causing him to projectile vomit or bleed the titan blood out, so his body clearly didn't see it as an issue. Hange had compared

the similarities between titan and human— Eren had only begun to seem tired when the sun had begun to set, akin to how a titan would.

Levi hummed, and in the darkness, he hadn't bothered to look, but he felt something wrap on his arm— Just for a moment, a brief moment he had to react, before the thing clamped *hard*.

It was enough so Levi could feel blood drawing through his uniform. His instincts kicked in before his brain could, and he had kicked the offender across the room, slamming them into the side of the bed with a loud crash. Levi stepped up to continue his assault, when he caught sight of the perpetrator.

Eren had bit him.

He had a feral look in his eyes, like he didn't know where he was at all. It was the glare of a wild animal, starving and willing to do anything if it meant surviving another night with a full stomach. When Levi called out for Eren's name, Eren growled at him, feral and uncivilised. This wasn't the kid Levi had helped raise. Levi only barely had another second to turn his anger to Hange before Eren had leapt up, arms outstretched and mouth going for Levi's neck. The only way he could've shielded himself in that split second was to stuff his hand in Eren's mouth, and watch the kid flail helplessly, digging his teeth into Levi's flesh.

'The blood makes him more titan oriented,' Hange noted, scribbling it down in their notebook. 'Tired when the sun set, hungry, but not for human food, rather for *human*...'

Moblit gave them an exasperated look, trying to pry Eren off of Levi's hand. Drool dripped down from the corners of his mouth, warmth spreading on Levi's bare skin and making him shiver. He hadn't wanted to, but he'd raised his leg and jammed it as far into Eren's stomach as he could physically handle, sending Eren flying across the room again, clutching his stomach. The force had sent him into the wall, cracking his skull against it with a loud bang. Eren fell limp, the back of his head steaming.

Hange had not been allowed to experiment on Eren, after that. Not for a very long time, at least.

Chapter 5: Nodus Tollens

Chapter Summary

The realisation that the plot of your life doesn't make sense to you anymore.

The first and second expedition outside of safety. Armin and Mikasa's graduation from training-- Now is a moment more important than ever.

Chapter Notes

More exploring the inside of a titan, a little bit of depressed Eren. fun

Eren had been on countless expeditions since his first. Daringly, they'd gone from Wall Rose patrols to sneaking into Wall Maria when the opportunity had presented itself. It had been only once. Eren had been on that one patrol. He still shivers thinking of the screams, the helplessness on his face as the blood of his fellow scouts splattered across his body, warm and enveloping in all the wrong ways. He still tears up, thinking of their expressions as they rot on bloody grass, becoming one with the Earth, their bodies forever unrecoverable.

One of those deaths that stuck with him, on that patrol, was the one when he'd been talking to the scout driving the supply wagon. It was a few moments after he'd instructed Eren to fire a black flare into the sky— The abnormal had been spotted coming in from the right, and it was coming in fast. Eren did exactly that, then laid low as the scout tried to ease both of their rapidly rising nerves.

'I'm sure Captain Levi has it,' he told Eren with the calmest smile, 'Don't you worry about a thing, kid.'

And Eren, the naive and young eleven year old he was, asked him, *'What do I do if something happens to you?'*

The scout had hesitated, then steeled his expression. *'Then you shove my body aside and ride this wagon as far into the formation as you can. Scream until someone comes to help you. We always have your back.'*

Those were his last words.

He'd been swept off of the wagon so fast Eren had blinked and he was gone. Thuds rumbled through the air as a blur of skin shot off to the side and skidded to a stop. The scout hung from its jaw, legs kicking and arms trapped in its mouth. Eren saw his mother's legs dangling, in that moment, and felt that stomach-dropping fear all over again. He screamed so incredibly loud it had steam rising from his mouth, his body dashing to grab the horse's reins and begin moving. The scout was a lost cause, he knew it through his tears and his shredded vocal chords, but something within him barked that he still could've helped somehow.

That abnormal chased down the wagon on all fours. Eren still remembers the warm breath huffing down his neck, the humidity of its panting on the top of his head, dampening its hair. He was so sure he was about to die, so sure it was over for him. Levi had jumped in at the last moment, panicking and holding Eren like a vice to his chest, wrapped in his cloak as the kid heaved and wept. He saw the blood of the scout dressing Eren's body from the left, and could only hold him tighter.

Eren had woken up screaming countless times for the weeks after, sobbing and crying and confusing the scouts passed in his dreams as his mother. His night terrors had gotten so bad at one point in those few weeks that Levi— Very, extremely, reluctantly— had had to slip some sleeping pills into Eren's tea just so Eren didn't collapse out of exhaustion from consecutive sleepless nights. He wasn't the only affected scout, but he was the only one brave enough to show it.

They'd been on few expeditions, at least with Eren in tow, since that trip to Wall Maria. Now, Eren was thirteen— Nearly, at the very least—, and Hange had hypothesised a new method of retaking Wall Maria all together. Why don't they use Eren as a protective shield? Levi had rejected the idea before Hange could even finish their sentence, but Erwin had held up his hand in their meeting room, allowing Hange to continue. Even Eren was interested— If there was any way he could help without being a liability to protect, he was all for it.

Eren's titan was strong, and on the bigger side, too. With lean muscles and a roar that deafens anyone too close, and an agile enough body, theoretically, he could protect a large cluster of people if they were all close together. Drawing titans closer would be a fault, yes, however, it also made it easier to kill them should Eren not have gotten to them first. With his body as a protection, they could also make room for more supplies, allowing them further into Wall Maria.

'And what do we do out there?' Levi had bit, crossing his arms. 'We get to Wall Maria, we have no way to plug the hole leading into Shiganshina. The whole operation is useless if we just have to go back. The titans will keep pouring through the gap regardless of how many we kill.'

Hange hums, tapping their chin. 'We can get a good scope of how bad the hole is, and arrange some sort of blockage to move.' They gesture to Eren, who had been really sitting there and wondering how he'd be able to do it. He jumps as the eyes turn to him. 'Eren's titan can handle enough weight on its shoulders in order to transport it from Wall Rose to Wall Maria, should a plug be possible. Will you, Eren?'

Eren swallows, thinking it all over. The eyes of Erwin, Hange, Levi, and a few other officials in the room turn to him, curious, doubting. 'I don't—I don't know if I can.' He balls his fists in his lap, turning his gaze downwards in shame. 'I'm sorry. I don't know if I can handle it.'

'Young man,' One speaks up. They idle with the lid of their flash, turning it back and forth before raising it to their lips, taking a swig. He has age yet youth in his features, wisdom yet recklessness. He's both sides of the same coin, and aware enough to know. 'The question was not if you *can*. The question was if you *will*. You're a pivot for humanity in these dark years, a spark to start a bushfire. All you need to do is brighten up.'

He thinks over this for a few moments, before taking in a deep breath, looking up. The look in his eyes is enough to have Hange smiling, turning to Erwin for the final say. Erwin stares deep into Eren's eyes, a silent command in them, before he nods. The lives of thousands are on Eren's shoulders, and those are heavier than any plug to carry.

Which is how Eren finds himself toying with the tip of the pocket blade he'd gotten years back, mentally preparing himself as people rush around him, loading wagons with supplies and kissing their loved ones goodbye. He sits in the back of one of the supply wagons, keeping track of inventory, but a dread at the back of his throat is keeping him from truly focusing on much happening around him.

'Oi, brat.' Eren pulls himself out of his stupor to turn to look at Levi, who peers over the wagon at him. There's a deep-laced concern in his expression that he doesn't give away through his words, expertly neutral as always. 'The moment you begin acting like a titan, I'm cutting you out, and I don't care if I sever all your limbs doing it. Don't lose control.'

That had only happened once, and even then, it was Eren's third time transforming. He'd found the comfort of the enveloping scarf too alluring, and let his titan do the work while he drifted. Never again. Never would he let his guard down again.

Eren gives him a confident nod. 'Yes, Heichou!'

People cheer them on as the scouts begin to trudge out of the comfort and safety of Wall Rose, nervous jitters spreading through the regiment like the common flu. Eren keeps his expression steeled and calm, looking anywhere but the driver of the wagon. He didn't want to see it again. He didn't want to ever have to see it again.

The moment they're out in the plains and decently far from Wall Rose, the formation comes to a slow. Tension hangs thick in the air as they stay idle in titan territory, eyes drifting to Eren as he vaults the wagon and runs off into the distance. They'd rehearsed this. The transformation was loud and terrifying, but familiar. If anything, it'd gone from being horrifying to a comfort, a safety barrier in places like these.

Far enough from his regiment, Eren withdraws the knife from his thigh strap and holds it to his palm. He hesitates for a moment— He always does—, before huffing and ramming it through the muscle. Lightning flashes all around him, his mind melding and transforming, his body growing new limbs, new muscles, new unfamiliar skin. The pain of it rips out of him as he screams, deep and rumbling, mind altered, more beast than human.

Hange uses their ODM to mount up to Eren's shoulder, followed quickly by Levi and the rest of the Special Operations squad. Eren huffs, still and waiting for orders as they grab his hair for leverage. Hange is the first to speak. 'Eren! Can you understand me?'

Eren turns slightly to glance at Hange, then nods, a plume of steam leaking from his teeth. Hange's eyes go wide with awe, before they focus on the task at hand, using their sword as a direction to move in. The formation moves first, and Eren follows close behind.

He has their back, this time.

Eren exhales a long stream of smoke, forcing his eyes open.

The ten metre resting at his feet begins to smoke, decaying into the ground, turning to ash as Eren focuses on regenerating his hand. He'd hit the titan so hard it had broken his hand, one of many injuries on their trip to Wall Maria. Eren doesn't know how far along they are— All he knows is he needs to kill as many titans as he can as he moves along.

He lingers close behind as the formation moves forward. No casualties so far, frankly, a miracle considering their last attempt heading into Wall Maria. Eren made sure of it. Weak of him, however, to be falling fatigued so soon into the trip, as one glance behind him still brings Wall Rose into vision, far, but not far enough for him to be so tired. The titan growls, subconsciously, and Levi glances backwards from his horse to look at the kid.

'He's pushing himself,' he says aloud, drowned by the beating of hooves against grass. 'Look at him. We need to get him out and let him rest for a bit.'

Erwin steels his expression. He had been prepared to deny his strongest soldier, for Levi is biased, worried. They all are— It's partially why he'd made the Special Operations squad ride at the front, away from the titan. The commander, too, wants to let his boy rest, but it's simply just not feasible. If he comes out of his titan now, he'll need a few hours of sleep to reconvene. It's a few hours too vulnerable, especially in open fields such as this. Eren needs to keep his head on his shoulders for a little while longer, and when they reach Wall Maria, he can have all the sleep he wants to.

He repeats this to Levi, who frowns, worrying his bottom lip. The captain almost says nothing, before Eld interrupts, clutching his reigns tight. 'But the last time he was in his titan form for too long, he tried to bite someone's head off.'

Petra nods, fidgeting with the seams along her leather reigns. 'He's right, Commander. We can find a forest to rest in while Eren recovers. The titans are uninterested in our supplies, so we can leave them below and rest in the branches.'

'Soldiers,' Erwin cautions. 'Don't worry about Eren. He's had three years of practice. He is not the little boy you once knew.' That latter comment has Levi baring his teeth, but he says nothing. He takes one last glance behind himself, before spurring on his horse faster, wishing for Wall Maria to arrive faster. Loyalty branded deep in their hearts, his soldiers follow.

Hours pass of movement. Eren's head is starting to blur the lines between his memories and memories from years far behind himself. His body moves on its own, he has control, he's simply fallen into the muscle memory of it all. Since Levi had last looked back at him, they'd come across exactly thirteen titans, each titan Eren ripping the nape from feeling like a countdown. He tries to focus, to keep himself cool, but it's as if his body has ejected him from the seat of clarity, forcing him to watch everything with dazed eyes and automatic movements he can barely recall telling himself to do.

The muscles in Eren's leg shoot up to his hip as he stomps a five metre into the ground. Blood splatters across his foot and leaves a crater in the ground where the head of the titan used to be. Killed.

He gets his arm bitten off by an abnormal coming in minutes later, but grabs its head with his other and squeezes it until it's popped. For assurance, he rips off its neck too. Killed.

Eren uses his remaining hand to push his fist into the soft flesh of a eight metre's under jaw, and ends up punching a hole through its mouth. It squirms where his fist is ripped apart, and goes still when he smashes the nape into the floor. Killed.

His mind is beginning to haze even further. The scarf wrapped around his body, keeping him at temperatures that should be killing him. It has never felt so warm, so soft and gentle. The voice, primitive from a creature that isn't him, roars with each death, cheering and itching to take over with each regenerated limb. Eren finally understands who it is, as he bites the neck off another seven metre. That rumble, that defiance of order, that resilience, it's the titan itself, not him, not him puppeteering it, it's the embodiment, soul, body, and brain of the titan. And it screams with each splatter of blood.

I'll kill them all.

I'll make them all suffer.

I'll never stop until they're all dead.

Eren turns his head, deep in the body of the titan, to the gentle, calming ambience of Shiganshina, peering at him beneath the flesh, beckoning him to sink deeper into the titan, to become closer to conjoining as one, like two unfortunate children merged together in birth. Walking towards it might be death for everyone he knows— Eren's learned to ignore it. But, he can't help the temptation of the eyes— He stares at it, long and hard, hot flesh melting crevices into the soft skin beneath his dulled eyes and swallowing him whole. This time, he fears, it may be permanent.

The resistance to peace in slumber comes out as a roar. The titan grumbles, an idle sense of disconnected pride as Eren takes on its beliefs, but it's a hypocrite to defiance. Eren huffs out, tearing his eyes from home and looking ahead, focusing on the track.

In front of him stands tall brick walls. He could cry from relief if it were possible. Instead, his titan stares at it, looking to the top, yearning for freedom, freedom just over brick walls. They stand tall for everything Eren hates with the ire of numerous glowers— The soldiers who kicked him down to the ground, beating a child of skin and bone for the mere act of pride. The officers, shoving his people off those cobble walls, laughing as lightning strikes. The dogs, their sharp teeth and their lust for blood, naive to their bite. Staring above him, Eren begins to realise how he feels deep down— Like a rabid creature, calloused palms pressed to the back of his head, shoving his cheek into biting gravel, pinned down, forced to submit.

His hands are moving before his brain can catch up. Even that, too, is lost to reverie. Beneath his skin, the muscles tense, shrinking as if shrivelled by heat, crawling up his fingers until they break the surface— It's painful, and as the other scouts climb the wall with their ODM gear Eren screams, trying to rid his fingers of the pain of crystals sprouting from him. A few Scouts look back, their grips tightening on their swords.

Kicked, shoved, mauled, pinned down, that violent grumble moans, a volatile spark to an oncoming flame. Each voice curls the boy up further and further in his own mind, so contrasting it gives him whiplash with each head turn.

This will help climb the wall, the predecessor says, his voice ringing reminders of owls, over and over again, soaring birds with all-seeing eyes and all-knowing wisdom.

The sensation cripples off with a few shards of crystal breaking from his paralysed fingers. It's a shimmering blue, bright and iridescent. Eren stares down at them, his hands, uncomprehending, ever confused. He didn't know he could do this. He didn't know there was even more to him, more to him that will be receiving questions later on. For now, however, he wants to get over the wall.

Huffing, he braces himself and pushes his fingers into the stone. It crumbles around the weight of his fingers and keeps him steady as he lodges a foot on the wall. Screams begin to sound from above him, panicked zipping and flashes of steel blinding him in the sunlight. His eyes dart around to try and find some familiar face— He needs to get up the wall, too, why are they stopping him?—, but he finds nothing, only expressions of terror, surprise, betrayal.

Something clangs on his nape. It startles Eren enough to let go of his hold on the walls— *Freedom*, that voice screams for—, tumbling backwards and raising a hand to his neck to protect whatever may be there from being crushed beneath his weight. Swords dig into his neck, and begin clanging against crystal. Levi's voice is faintly audible, like he's muffled by tonnes of water. Eren feels the skin around his nape, the way it blends into a lovely ombre of skin and crystal, a protective barrier around where he lays. He's invincible, untouchable. He could lay here forever if he wanted, and never be hurt from it. He doesn't need to eat, or sleep, or move around in this position, protected by crystal, safe from society.

Eren stares at Shiganshina, and with a flesh-swallowed arm, reaches out for it.

Light breaks through the surface and pushes wind onto his back. Goosebumps chase the feeling as arms toss metal aside, reaching in and yanking Eren out. It hurts, but now it's a familiar pain, a tolerable one, a grounding one. Eren gasps, breathing in lungfuls of air like he hadn't in years. He realises, slowly, that he's crying, tears running down his cheeks as Levi

spurs into action, holding Eren close while using his ODM to mount the wall, scaling upwards.

When they're at the top, Eren crumbles to his knees, staring down at the brick on his hands and shaky legs. He brings a trembling finger to touch at his face— The marks are permanent. A permanent branding of what he is, unnameable, untamed and feral. Eren feels nauseous. There was a sense of comfort he had, knowing the marks would fade, knowing he wouldn't be marked forever as a beast. This time, he knows it's different. This time, he knows he's no longer human.

'Good work, Eren,' Gunther praises, helping Eren sit up, wrapping his cloak around him. He hands Eren a pouch of water, which he gulps down, rivulets of cold water running down his chin and into his sweat-laced shirt. 'You did really well— You saved us all out there.' His eyes drift to Hange, who peers over the side of the wall, taking notes in their book. 'You didn't mention you could do that, though. Is it some kind of trick you were working on with Hange that we didn't know about?'

Eren groans, ripping the empty pouch from his dry lips, panting. It feels like his lungs are full of water, drowning him, deriving him from as much air yet fuelling him another way. The crystals— His fingers twitch at the sensation, the memory of rock ripping from his flesh, fungi ripping from the ground— are completely new. Yet, again, it was exactly like the first time he had ever transformed. He didn't know he could do it, but it was instinctual, a dusty toy brushed over with matured fingers.

A breeze runs through the back of his shirt as he hands Gunther the pouch with quiet gratitude. Gunther smiles, shrugging it off. 'Just take a rest here while we scout out the area and figure out the holes. We'll be back soon.'

And just like that, Gunther is running off to join the other members of the Special Operations squad and a few other squads, running down the curve of Wall Maria. Eren doesn't have the courage to raise his head and try to spot what used to be his home— Even the thought of seeing the state of it now hurts his chest. He wishes he could wipe the memories all together, sometimes, but he knows it'd be at the sacrifice of more important things than his own grief.

Moving to sit up, Eren lets out a harsh sigh as he turns to look out Wall Maria, into the abyss of uncharted territory. He's never been up here, before, he realises with a soft inhale, green plains expanding far past what Eren could ever hope to see— They teeter off into the horizon as nothing more than a dividend, an infinite desert of death. He can spot titans slowly trudging towards the wall, in that dormant, absent fashion they always do; they haven't spotted anything worth chasing. Eren grumbles, clenching his hands back and forth, trying to take his mind off of their similarities. He tries to look on the bright side, it's what Armin would do.

"Look at how far it goes," he would exclaim, wonder in his eyes, completely enthralled by the land, *"Do you think lands of ice are even possible when it all looks like this?"*

And Eren would scoff if he were any more cheerful, lean back on his two hands and inattentively kick at the stones and pebbles on the wall, trying to play off his own awe as he'd say, *"Probably not. That stuff came from the same book as the infinite salt water."*

Mikasa would frown at him, gently nudging his arm with her leg as she'd say, *"Don't be so negative, Eren. You want it to be real as much as we do."*

She'd be right. He'd never admit it, but Armin and his book were one of the sole reasons Eren had ever even thought of the world beyond the walls. Before, he was a drifting piece of bread, waiting to be plucked out of the water by the sharp beaks of ducks, with no purpose, no meaning, no benefits. Bread kills ducks, anyway. Watching the clouds float by over the greenery, Eren wonders if they've have seen what he can only consider a fantasy. Do their soft cotton hold stories of pure abstractionism, or were they tall tales, leaving Eren to have no choice but to believe them as rain pelts his skin?

Sighing, Eren looks away from the sky, and turns his attention back to the ground. A few titans have spotted his silhouette from afar, and they travel in a half-jog half-walk, as if deciding whether trying to get to him was worth it. He spits out a laugh to himself, edging closer to the corner of the wall, peering over it with shaking hands. There's a weird sense of adrenaline he feels as he looks over the edge— It'd been a hypothetical leaning towards truth, but Hange had observed that titans often went for Eren as they did humans— In theory, Eren was just a bigger, more powerful, skin suit of a titan that was a human. So if he fell, that was it. There was no saving him, no Levi, no Scouts, no-one. He'd have to fend for himself, and he's not sure he even has the energy in him to transform.

"Though," something far at the back of his mind mumbles, timid and afraid, *"it would be so nice to not have to worry about anything anymore."*

Eren stares down at the gnashing and drooling mouths of titans beneath him. So many eyes stare back up at him, and he promises for a moment they seem like they're afraid, terrified of what they're doing. He could make those looks go away, even if just for a moment. He could make something happy, even if it weren't aware of it.

Eren doesn't know what would be scarier— Falling, or landing. His head spins as he gazes down upon the titans, at their grubby hands, and their wet lips dripping with drool. Animals, he realises, it's all they are. Animals which happen to look like humans, lesser evolved versions of them. They want nothing more than to eat, even if it'll do nothing for them; it would make them happy, make them feel good, a second of rush at the cost of his life.

"And all it would take is one singular push."

Backing away from the edge of the wall, Eren takes a deep breath, trying to fight off the pressure in his head. He ends up on his back, staring up at the blue sky, trying to recall names of different clouds. He'd read it in one of Erwin's encyclopedias when he was a bit younger, and strangely, it had always stuck with him. Eren feels the relief wash over his body at the calming of his muscles, and he smiles to himself, satisfied. His eyes weigh heavy, his chest slowing, regaining energy lost from the trip over. And as he begins to slip into a deep slumber, he dreams of bright blue eyes and a flowing red scarf.

The scarf feels weird.

Eren squirms in its hold, listening to every crack of the fabric, to every stiff shuffle of it. It's coated in a layer of ice, soft and gentle, a faraway texture Eren's never felt before. The people before him have, and they tell him it's called snow, with gentle smiles and pitiful looks. It's snowing, in Shiganshina, and Eren lays in it until it begins to bury him from all around. It's neither too cold nor too numbing, it's simply a presence he's learned to live with. It wraps around him with a softness that tells him it's soon to follow the scarf's path soon.

'Alright, Eren, you can get out now.'

Eren hums, his muscles flinching as the chill begins to crawl up his legs. He would lift his head to look, but he's tired. He's always tired, nowadays. Why is that? He's so exhausted he thinks he'll fall over dead any day now, his only fuel, his only driving force being the ability to see them again, Armin, Mikasa. The illusions of Shiganshina are long since lost on him, but he likes to delude himself, even if just for a while. Being naive really was his greatest blessing.

'Eren?'

Focusing onto his knees, Eren feels little shards of crystal surround his legs. It rises up and digs into his skin as if locking him in place, the scarf tightening around his body, holding him still. It's not as if he wants to move, and at that thought, he drifts once more to that day atop Wall Maria. How long has it been since then? Two days, or five weeks? Six, seven months? He lost count some time ago.

'Oi, brat. You can come out of the titan now. It's rock solid— Hange's taken their sample.'

'Do you think he *can* come out?' Then two dull shakes, something hitting his neck. Eren barely feels it, a presence that hurts yet blends into the cacophony of sensation over his skin. 'The nape is pretty dense.'

Crystals rip from his fingertips. It hurts. It hurts as much as it did the first day, and it'll keep hurting until the day he dies. It's a burden of use he'll have to carry with him, for he has no one to shoulder his responsibility onto. Even if it kills him, as long as it helps someone else, he won't ever complain about it. Why should he complain? He's been gifted with the weight of hope, with the task of keeping that flame alive, even if it means his dies down in the process. A symbol is never alive.

Movement shuffles around on his cocoon, and begins to slam down. He jostles with each hit. The crystals climb to his abdomen, wrapping and stabbing into his stomach, bleeding warmth all over it. It hurts, and he can feel tears coming in, purely instinctual rather than emotional, like how a baby deer fawns over its attacker in order to win its sympathy. No baby deer ever fawns for itself, for the antlers it will grow and the muscle it will gain.

"I'm being eaten alive," Eren duly notes, his eyes drifting down to his chest. He's exhausted, ready to forever rest and never get up, and he's almost sold on the idea, if not for his last final

thought. "*I'm going to die.*"

A fury lights within him at the thought. To die to his own body, to his own curse, it'd be worse than giving up. He blinks the tears away, forcing his arms to move. He feels skin tearing as he bends his elbow with all his might, hands sinking into hot flesh as he pushes up, his back pressed against more needles of crystal. It all melts into the warmth of broken skin on his back, forcing a scream from his throat. Crystal cracks around him, dripping down the sides of his body, framing him like a blockage of broken glass.

He screams and cries as the barrier breaks, as the scarf rips from his body and takes his skin with it. He's ejected from the memory of his home, and he leaves it like a burning memory in a mass fire, swallowing fresh air as hands rip him out. Eren cries, blood dripping all over him, a hug that never fully seems right. Faintly, amidst the pain, he feels Levi's cloak wrap around him, and through his bleary sight, he can see the disturbed look on Hange's face. The titan is frozen, the job is done.

Eren's limbs will forever be engraved within the neck, but he tries not to mind— They'll just grow back, anyway.

'I won't let you do it.'

Eren scowls, baring his teeth as he feels hot rage begin to overcome him. 'Why not? I can do it! I've been training for years on end, and I've even perfected the ODM gear. I can keep up with you if I have to.'

Levi shakes his head, crossing his arms. 'This plan has been in action for two years now, and I knew it was doomed from the beginning.' He clicks his tongue, looking away. 'Hange is crazy for wanting to put you in that position, especially when you're also one of our *main shields* on the journey to Wall Maria— Even regarding you as something so low makes me want to spit.' Turning back to Eren, Levi leans back in his seat, the gentle morning light from the window behind him seeping in through the curtains. 'Eren, the first—and last— time we went to Wall Maria, you were already struggling to keep yourself composed as we were going.'

Eren opens his mouth to protest, but Levi beats him to it, holding up a hand. 'On the way back, you barely made it to the wall before you got out of the nape and fell unconscious for two days. It's more inconvenient for us than it is useful.' Scoffing, the captain gestures to the papers resting on his table, incredulous. 'And now they want you to carry a wall as tall as you are— If not *taller*— and plug up Shiganshina? How are you going to get that wall across miles of land, let alone through the first hole *into* Shiganshina, *all the while* protecting a hundred men?'

'We can figure something out,' Eren tries, helpless. He knows when Levi protests this much that it just won't happen, but Eren is desperate, something within him clawing for some way to be useful, to be worth keeping. 'Heichou, I can do it. I'm older, stronger, I'm *ready*— We've been practicing my hardening, I can protect the nape if the titans get that bad, I can—'

'And get the rest of us killed?' Levi sits up, his frown deepening with each immature reply. 'Is that what you want? Those monsters out there won't give you even a second to put down the wall and get ready to fight— They're animals, they think with their stomachs. And hell— Even if you do somehow manage to plug Shiganshina, how will you guarantee it's security? Titans will gradually build up, pushing against this wall, and eventually it will fall. Hange's idea is stupid, and by wanting to go through with it, you're just as much of a moron as you were five years ago, Jaeger. You listen to them so feverishly about this idiotic plan because you want to feel useful, but there are *other ways to be useful*.'

'How? You won't let me do anything,' Eren cries, feeling those frustrated tears begin to grow in his eyes. He clicks his tongue and stares down at Levi's carpeting, the memories of when he was a kid and trying to escape ghosting themselves on the floor. 'You don't let me go on expeditions with my ODM gear. You don't let me into Trost, or Sina, or anywhere without bodyguards, like I'd turn into a titan and kill everyone inside the walls. You don't let me do *anything*, you won't let me be useful in a way that matters.'

Levi stares at him for a long while. He thinks on it long and hard, trying to keep his composure. Eren is a teenager, it's custom for them to be so rebellious and loud at this age. He wants to be useful in a way he can see the transformation, live, because Eren is and always will be an impatient person, expecting to see the fruits of his labour right after planting the seed. The captain stares down at his boy, watching those tears stifle themselves, the shaking of Eren's shoulders all too telling that he's upset, taken the cork off a shaken bottle of wine. He sighs, deep and low, a sound Eren looks up to immediately.

'Next week, me and the Special Operations are going to a forest not too far out in Wall Maria to set up base. It's one of the few places we can be out there and safe due to the height of the branches.' Those eyes light up, teal sparkling in the morning sunrise. Levi can already hear the excitement in the way he begins to shift his weight, tears drying up; it's endearing, but annoying all the same— Levi has to make sure the brat knows that crying isn't the way to get what he wants. 'You may come with us, under two conditions.'

The kid's face is so intensely joyful it makes Levi feel a little bad at his next words. 'First, you are to wake at the crack of dawn and go the patch of trees northwest of headquarters to practice your ODM without having to use your titan.' Eren's face drops. 'Second, you study with me until the expedition, everyday, *no excuses*.' It drops lower. 'Am I understood?'

Eren hesitates for a moment. 'Levi, come on—'

'Am I understood, Scout?' He hates pulling rank, especially on the boy, but he won't hesitate if it means less insolence.

Though, it is a little amusing to watch Eren kick at the floor like he'd been scolded as a kid all over again. Levi can see the phantoms of a ten year old on his floor, tossed in by Hange,

hands dirtied from throwing rocks behind him all night. Oddly, despite the annoyance of such an untamed brat, he almost misses it. 'Yes, Heichou...'

'Good. Now get out of my office.'

The night before the expedition, are the trainee's graduation ceremony.

Despite his outward reluctance to go, Eren finds himself eager to get to Trost in order to celebrate. He realises, riding upon Armika, that this will be the first time seeing people who are actually his age in half a decade now. His stomach quells at the thought, and briefly, he wonders if he'll be able to see any familiar faces in the crowd. Biting the inside of his lip, Eren tries not to think about it. *Please don't be stupid, you two.*

Levi seems able to read his mind, spurring his horse besides Eren's on the right, that ever present frown on his face. His voice would sound as it usually does to most, but Eren can hear the calming factor inside of it, easing the chills on his spine. 'Don't be nervous, Eren. We'll be at the back most of the time— Commander Erwin will do a majority of the talking.'

Commander Erwin had left earlier that morning to get ready at Trost— It was sunset when the rest followed. Petra chuckles from up ahead, glancing back. 'All you need to do Eren is have that frown you always have on your face— Makes us look somewhat less intimidating!'

Eren lets out an affronted squawk, turning his chin up at the insult. Oluo snickers to his left, before biting his tongue which Eren can afford to be a little smug at. The banter falls flat after a few moments, though, and Eren is left back to his thoughts, stewing in his mind. He doesn't know what to expect with the other trainee graduates— He'd only ever been surrounded by officials, and people he knows he can trust. Should he be casual with them? Should they respect him? Eren doesn't know how he'd feel with a bunch of people his age calling him sir, or captain, or whatever. The thought does make him huff a laugh, though.

They'll be coming from all over the Walls just to graduate at Trost— Some may even come from Sina, and while Eren does initially turn his nose up at that thought— What do they know about war and fighting?— he tries to calm himself, thinking of what Commander Erwin would say. To be considerate. To put belief in people that they are better than the poor few Eren's run into.

Reaching up to his face, Eren traces over the red marks lined into his skin. They hadn't faded ever since the expedition to Wall Maria. It had eaten at him for days afterwards, to the point he'd refuse to leave his room without something to cover his face. In the end, it had taken a lot of assuring from Hange and Levi, and a lot of getting used to in order to walk out without wanting to cry every time someone turned his way. He's thankful a majority of the Scouts

were used to him by now— They said they thought it looked cool. The few that didn't say the same said it was apart of Eren's being, and that there would be little point fighting it. They said to think of it as a birthmark.

Trainee graduates whom had spent their lives in the Walls in safety may not say the same, though.

'If someone asks you,' Eld says, drawing Eren out of his stupor, 'you graduated prematurely. They don't need to know you were here since you were a kid— We'll tell whichever fools decide to join the Survey Corps.'

'With talk like that, it might as well be no-one,' Gunther jokes, quirking a brow at Eld. Eld rolls his eyes, and with a few more minutes, the ceremonial grounds come into view.

It's a rather small place for so many trainees. There are torches lining wooden fences and a wide stage encompassing an entire side of the ground. Trainees stand synchronised in front of the stand, saluted and still in a uniformity Eren has never seen in his entire life. They all stand there blank-faced, a few smug, which Eren supposes they have a right to. He doesn't get a good enough look for long enough to see any one he recognises, so he drops hope all together. Despite his relief, he can't help but feel a little disappointed. He'd thought today was the chance. He hadn't realised military camp would be so viscerally strict. Their horses break the silence and surprisingly draw few eyes as the rest of the Special Operation Squad ride up to the back of the stage, hitching their horses.

Levi pulls his hood up, so Eren does too.

They walk with Levi leading the way to the back of the stage, behind Erwin. The two exchange muted whispers, nothing Eren really listens to as he zones out. Whatever it is, Levi seems to be surprised, so it must be some quick change of plans. He stands there in the dark, watching the Military Police talk about their exclusivity, then the Garrison about their significance to the walls. At the front of the trainee graduates are the ten top rankers amongst the 104th training squad, consisting of wide eyes, sweaty faces, more smug grins, and blank looks. Eren sighs, suffering, and tries not to cry out when Gunther elbows him in the gut, murmuring a *behave* beneath his breath.

The squad marches forth onto the stage when Commander Erwin moves forward. Eren stands between Levi and Petra as they salute, Levi searching the crowd. He seems to find something, or someone, his eyes widening before he clicks his tongue, frustrated. Leaning towards Eren, Levi whispers, 'Oi, brat. When you have to go up there and speak, you are to look straight ahead, at the end wall. Don't even think for a second to look in the crowd— I'll know if you do. If you look into the crowd, you'll make a fool of the Survey Corps, and I'll beat your ass for it.'

Eren, thrown off, fully turns his head to look at his captain, incredulousness on his face. One look from Levi has Eren jolting, facing forward again. He hadn't even known he was supposed to be speaking, if he had, he would've actually been listening to Erwin's lecture. 'Heichou?—'

'That's an *order*.'

Impossibly confused, Eren manages a minute nod and keeps looking forward, using everything in his body not to search the crowd for what Levi had seen. He trusts Levi, and if there's something in the crowd that'll make Eren panic enough, Eren sure as hell won't be wanting to find out what it is. Instead of dwelling on the order, committing it to his subconscious, Eren listens in on Erwin's words.

'In the five years since the fall of Wall Maria, more than sixty percent of the legion's forces lost their lives.' Eren worries the inside of his lip, faint memories of that day in the wagon dancing around his peripherals. His shoulders stiffen at warmth slipping between the cracks of his jacket and his shirt, hot like blood, nothing more than sweat. 'Sixty percent in five years— An insane figure. Any trainees who join us will participate in next month's sortie beyond the walls.'

Erwin's gaze, calm as ever, drifts across the crowd. Worried expressions stare back at him, shoulders beginning to shake as sweat gathers beneath collars. 'We expect thirty percent will not return. In four years, most recruits will be dead, but— Those who make it through that hell will become superior soldiers, capable of surviving anything.'

Taking a moment to breathe, Erwin continues. 'So now you have the cold, hard facts. Any still willing to risk their lives, remain here. Ask yourselves, *am I willing to offer up my beating heart for mankind?*' A few trainees hesitate, shuffling back and forth. They still like the calming of a heartbeat as Erwin raises his hand. 'There is little more.' As he speaks, Miche and Petra step out of formation, Miche handing Petra a tapestry that they spread apart together, displaying to the crowd. With the lighting, Eren can see through it— It's a map of the Walls. 'On this expedition, we will be heading from the South of Wall Rose directly. There is a faint contingency plan in place, for a way we can retake Wall Maria.'

Gasps erupt from the crowd, low and soft. Eyes shift from fellow to another, as Petra rolls up the tapestry, placing it behind herself as she falls back into formation with Miche. Erwin waits for the silence to arrive, before sighing, half-turning to the squad behind him. His eyes lock onto Eren's, and immediately Eren begins to feel his heartbeat pick up. Those blue eyes gaze into his, scrutinising him, mentally preparing him, before they move to the side, back to the crowd.

'This is Special Operations Squad Member Eren Jaeger. He will explain the plan, and from there, you can decide for yourselves if your sacrifice is necessary for humanity.'

Stepping aside, Erwin makes room for Eren to take the centre stage. With a deep breath, and a gentle nudge from Levi at the small of his back, Eren steps forward, eyes on the opposite wall. For all the eyes staring back at him, he keeps his straight ahead, not daring to look down. He removes his hood from his head, raising his hand to a salute. A few of them looked an uncanny degree of surprised, he notes in his peripheral. The marks burn like hot metal on his skin.

'I am Special Operations Squad Member Eren Jaeger. The Survey Corps' main priority as of the Fall of Wall Maria is to reclaim it through plugging the hole in the wall leading outside the walls, inside Shiganshina.' Incredulous glares light in his peripheral, followed by quiet murmurs. Like Erwin, following in his footsteps, Eren waits for it to calm before continuing. 'We will move from the interior of the Trost District directly into titan territory, and continue

moving until we approach the exterior of Wall Maria. As of 850, we have taken this trip once, resulting in extreme succession with measuring the hole in the wall and the extent of the damage.'

Pausing, Eren glances over to his Commander, a question in his eyes. Erwin hums, then shakes his head. Eren nods, turning forward once more, expression steeled. There will be no explanation for the marks on his face, then. 'We will take another expedition next month towards Shiganshina, where we will bring a fifteen metre wall to combat the hole. Once the hole is covered, and titans are removed from the area, we will begin reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Shiganshina district and Wall Maria.'

Stepping back and into formation, Eren releases a long breath, feeling the air rush out of him as quick as he could swallow it. Petra leans over to him, whispering a *good job*, before Erwin takes focus once more. 'This decision you make tonight is not permanent. The introductory ceremony is a overview of how many new recruits to expect. Tomorrow, you will make your final and legal decision. Whichever regiment you elect to join, you are doing great things for the survival of humanity. That is all.'

The trainees let out a synchronised cry as they all salute once more. Erwin turns, and the Squad files out soldier by soldier until the darkness basks them once more, hiding them from the sharp gazes of two of the top ten in the crowd.

'Who was it?'

Levi vaults himself against the nearest tree trunk as Eren speaks. He winces as Eren's grapples wrap themselves around a branch and swing Eren around before he lands on his feet. It's expert manoeuvring, he'll give the boy that, but it's dangerous. Eren had a way of integrating himself into everything he did, reckless and suicidal, if his ODM work was any notion at all to go off of.

'Eh?'

'The person you didn't want me to look at,' Eren continues, shaking his limbs as he watches the titans stumble into the forest, chasing after the two. They'd been ordered to try and capture some titans for Hange to experiment on, hence the expedition the day after the ceremony. 'Was it someone you knew?'

Levi hums, mind racing to reply, before he settles with a nod. 'He would have distracted you from your speech. You followed orders well, Eren, good job.'

He can see the kid visibly brighten at the words before consciously reeling himself in. 'Thank you, Heichou.'

The captain nods beneath the pair to the two titans smiling up at them. One is blond, with an ugly absent grin across its face. He can see Eren getting nervous looking at it, so he redirects his attention to the other, this one on all fours, however not an abnormal. Their orders were to lure just two titans far enough into the woods for the rest of the Squad to launch the grapples onto them and trap them into place, and while theoretically it would be easier for Eren to turn into a titan and pick them up, Levi didn't want to risk anything. This was the technique they always used.

'You getting antsy, Eren?' Levi turns back to Eren, who jolts, drawn from his thoughts. The kid purses his lips, glancing back down, before glancing away, rubbing the back of his neck as he always does when he's nervous.

'That blond titan— It looks like someone I knew..' Levi quirks a brow. Eren doesn't often talk about his life before the Scouts prior to the Fall. It's not like he can remember much that isn't drenched in layers of pain and regret, so he avoids talking about it all together until Levi has to prod it from him. 'From when I was a kid. It sort of looks like a soldier from the Garrison that I used to talk to a lot.'

Levi, before he can lose himself to his thoughts, nods. 'Right. I'll handle the blond one, you take the brown-hair. We're going to head northwest and northeast to the other side of the forest, let them be captured, then rendezvous directly north afterwards. Special Operations is heading back together.' Eren nods, and with a smooth fluidity in his movements, steps off the branch and zips away. The brunet titan follows him, teeth barely missing his ankles.

His mind flickers back to the ceremony, and Levi sighs shaking his head. Yesterday night, he'd been watching the crowd for the two children they'd run into at Shadis' home. Like they had said, they were there, taller, fitter, more determined, and in the top ten of the class. The girl was first, and the boy was fifth. They were standing still like the rest of their comrades were, and the boy made eye contact with Levi when he was scanning the crowd. He'd smiled, but it fell when Levi scowled and whispered to Eren his command.

When Eren stepped up to speak, dropping his hood, Levi could see the raw, visceral look of rekindled grief on the two's faces. Their jaws physically fell open, and their stances fumbled as they kept all their comments to themselves, silent as the brother they thought dead gave a speech as a member of the most elite military squad mankind had ever known. The girl's eyes fell open, sparkling with life as they sprouted with tears, and the trainee graduates next to the boy cast him weird looks as he began to sob in his spot. Levi felt strange, watching the display, and even today, can not figure out what label to put on how he felt.

There were three others in the top ten who'd made surprised faces— Not so much surprised, more so shocked, wearing the expressions of one who finds an old toy that they thought long lost. Levi made sure to keep a note with them— Eren had never mentioned any other friends other than Mikasa and Armin, and with his temper, Levi doubts he'd made any more aside from them.

Regardless, Levi knows their minds are made. They'd been made ever since they'd encountered the three scouts in Sina. Levi dreads their arrival. The situation is going to get even worse— Not only will Eren be forever upset at what Levi will have to inevitably explain to him, his friends will be even more upset. The captain has no good excuse for any

of their accusations that he can hear at the back of his mind. He has no good explanation for himself, other than the fact that he'd lied, and even then, he fails to come up with a reason as to why. Levi's untruths and secrets are catching up to him, but he can't find himself to regret any of it. He supposes that when the situation inevitably falls upon him, he'll have to take in stride.

He'd never say it aloud nor admit it in his own heart, but he cares about Eren. He didn't at first, the kid was nothing more than a nuisance, but he grew on the captain. His eyes flickered in awe like hers did, his smile and his determined glare locked onto his target like hers always did. They were alike in so many ways, and worst came when Levi did a little digging. Isabel and Eren were related— Distant and maternal, but they were cousins. The gleam in their eyes seemed to be passed down each generation without fail.

Levi still wants what's best for him, regardless of Isabel. He always has. But he can't lie to himself anymore to make himself feel any less condemned— he'd withheld the fact that he'd run into Eren's childhood friends out of selfishness, out of the fear that Eren would double his efforts to get back into Trost and reunite with them, leaving Levi in the dust, grasping onto fading memories of a girl he loved like his own. Eren was the same age that she was when they had first met, now, making the fact that Eren might end up shutting him out all together all the more terrifying.

Levi knew it was for the best, for Eren to reunite with them. He wouldn't be surprised if all Eren wanted to do was linger around them. He'd have to accept it, absorb the blow and repel it for someone who truly does deserve it. A part of him, however, desperately wants him to do everything in his power to keep the two away. He feels so insanely conflicted on how to deal with the issue. Levi normally always has a good solution for each of his problems, but he is drawing blanks on this one. Grasping at shadows.

Beneath him, the tree begins to tremble— The titan digs its fingers into the wood, trying to haul itself up. Eren must be waiting for him at the rendezvous by now. Pushing his thoughts aside, Levi hops down and begins to move.

He has a job to do.

The titans are tied up and carted away the next time Levi comes to actually focus on his surroundings. Eren gives him a bright smile, so clueless, so proud, as the two mount their horses. They take up the rear tail of the two wagons carting the titans off and barely make it out of the forest before hooves beat the ground beneath them, a scout skidding to a stop in front of them. His expression is laden in terror, dread, as he bows briefly to the squad, regarding Captain Levi.

'What is it?' Levi asks, gripping his reins tight.

The scout fumbles for a moment, before gritting his teeth. 'Captain Levi! We are to make an emergency appearance in Trost!' Eren sits up, alarmed, finally focusing on the conversation— Levi has no doubt he had been zoning everything out before. It's a foolish habit he's picked up recently, to do nothing but gaze into the distance until conversation achieves his approval, garnering his attention.

'Why?' Levi snaps, feeling an anxious chill run up and down his spine. The Scout hesitates for another moment, stuttering over himself and glancing down at their lap. Their eyes speak in ways telling Levi that they don't even believe their own words, as they yell,

'Trost has been compromised!'

The wind screams in Eren's ears as the Squad shoots through open plains.

Panting fills the air, their horses struggling, but as with the humans, they are soldiers, and they push on through the exhaustion. They had to leave the two titans behind, much to Hange's disappointment, but the latter was short-lived— There were frankly bigger problems, bigger problems dancing a familiar dance of smoke and fire that Eren can see from all the way across Wall Rose. His heart sinks in his chest.

It was that titan again. The one that ruined his life made its return, and now shoots for the home he had to fall onto in order to survive. Not only him, but Armin, Mikasa, they both had to live there far longer than Eren ever had. His mind flashes back to that day, to the initial impact, to the flying boulders and crushed bodies beneath the street, corpses who hadn't even gotten the chance to fight. Was it a mercy, to be killed so early on, making Eren the unlucky bastard to be the one to live, the one who had to live in order to fight for humanity?

'Eren.' Commander Erwin's voice pulls him from his thoughts, redirecting his attention ahead. 'When we get to Trost, scale the wall and transform. Minimise casualties as much as you possibly can.'

A few startled looks shoot through the other members of the squad, Eren's voice trembling as he speaks, 'Commander— The Military Police will have all of us killed if they know what I am.' It's a miracle he hasn't begun crying; his throat is clogged up, his eyes blurry with tears and his head spinning as they grow closer and closer to the wreckage. Eren wants to get there all the more faster, and briefly, he wonders if this is how it must've felt to be Hannes, on that day, deciding between death and leaving someone to it. His mother's blood, her screams lay thick on his skin, forever dirtied.

Levi clicks his tongue. 'That doesn't matter, Jaeger. What matters is you protect as many people as you can, you got it? We'll handle the Military Pigs— All you need to do is transform and make sure we don't suffer as bad a loss as we did last time.' Choking out a sob, Eren nods, holding his head down. Shame leaks from him like a broken faucet, a hand raised to his mouth to mute the noise. Tears slip past his cheeks and fly into the wind as they dash closer and closer to the carnage. Levi casts a look over his shoulder to the kid, sympathy panging in his chest.

'Now's not the time, Jaeger. Get yourself together.'

Soon, the frequency of titans grows too much— They're forced to abandon their horses and use their ODM gear to latch onto the wall. Levi remains behind his squad as they race upwards, flying above the overhang of the wall to look to the chaos. Titans fill homes and screams rip through the air, akin to the panicked noise of birds fleeing as a flock. Erwin is sending his squad out in divisions within seconds, processing the situation at hand, a calmed turmoil in his eyes.

'Levi. You and Eren head down to the hole and fight off as many titans that come through. I'll rendezvous with Garrison General Pyxis to figure out a plan of action.' Turning to Eren, Erwin steels his gaze. 'Eren. Use your titan for good. Show humanity that not all new things are bad.'

Eren nods, furiously wiping his tears away. He looks to be seeing an entirely different town, other than Trost. The two leaves imprints on his thumb, from how hard he presses into the wood.

Erwin is gone before long and Levi is zipping down the wall, wind pelting his ears as Eren follows close behind. He waits for Levi's order, he always has, keeping his knife steady in sweaty palms, tracing over the gold outline of his home on the handle. Levi slams down into a room, stabilising himself with his grapples, the tiles beneath him slipping. He looks over at Eren, who, midair, makes eye contact. His eyes shimmer, dancing that line of rage and resilience once more.

'Eren!'

'Yes, Captain!' His blood splatters on Levi's face, and lightning fills the sky, flashing it a dull orange, like the sun had hidden behind the horizon to escape the shock.

Levi grapples up onto the titan's shoulder and holds onto his hair, leaning into his ear. 'I'll be right near you at all times! Take down as many as you can.' The titan growls, nodding, its muscles shifting beneath Levi's feet. Levi nods, holding onto the hair tight for a moment, before moving off.

Chapter 6: Chrysalism

Chapter Summary

The tranquil feeling of being indoors during a storm, despite all of the chaos, noise and turmoil, you feel a calming peace.

The attack on Trost, and it's subsequent aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Writing the court scene was so hard for no reason. Kind of. Sorry if it seems OOC.

It's over.

Hot air pants onto his sweaty uniform. He can feel the blood rushing to the tips of his fingers, tears dripping from the button of his nose. The world around him is blurry, delirious with acceptance. If he's held like this any longer, his jacket will slip off and he'll fall.

Armin is going to die.

He's going to die alone, pathetic and helpless to save his friends. He's going to die, with no one to tell what happened to him, or what titan ate him. There will be no remains of him, swallowed whole and crushed in the creature's oesophagus. His name will fade with the countless amounts of others who never even made it out of training— Thomas, Mina...

His shoulders creak in pain as he begins to fall out of his jacket. The titan's breath marks steam on his boots, and make his feet feel like they're burning alive. Armin can't find the strength within him to cling onto life, onto the ends of his jacket. His swords had long since fallen to the ground, better suited to rot than to protect someone as weak as him. Someone who always needed protecting. Someone who always needed Mikasa, or even Eren, long gone, his memory ever persistent as he was.

Sobs begin to wrench from his eyes, his teeth gritting. He never even got to say hello to his best friend again. Armin thought he was going crazy, watching his best friend on that stage. He raced to find him around the back, but all he saw was the Scout insignia fading into the

night and a lack of teal eyes looking back at him. They didn't even glance his way. He missed them so much, and now he'll be left to rot in the titan's stomach, trying to remember the colour of his eyes through the haze of death.

Arms wrap around him and he's being flung through the air.

He hacks out a cough as he's shot back to a brick chimney, his skull ramming against it hard enough to make his head spin. Gas hisses in the air as a blur of green whirls around the titan, blood splattering against pale skin. Armin leans over to his side and throws up, wanting to puke out all the organs within him. He feels sick enough to lay down and die, but this is no place for it.

Feet clatter upon roof tiles and stop in front of him, yanking him to his feet with a strong pull on his arm. He stumbles for a moment, tears wiped on dry jacket sleeves, before bowing, silent. A tongue clicks, and a hand pushes his head up. 'Get your head in the game. No point promising to find us in the regiment if you're going to die giving up.'

Armin's eyes shoot up. His meets gunmetal, a slit half-mast gaze that erupts a spark of fury in him that Armin's sure he's gotten from Eren. He moves his fist before he can even stop to think, and hurls a punch in the captain's face as hard as he possibly can. Levi stumbles, clutching his face, scowling all the while as he regains himself.

'You really think getting mad at me now is a good time?'

'Where is he?' The air is stagnant around them. Levi turns his gaze to the floor, his face scrunching within itself. Armin moves forward, feeling tears building in his eyes, his throat clogging with sobs he cannot help but release out, like a blister overwhelmed with pus. His mind races with everything flashing in his mind from the past few days alone, the appearance of his childhood friend maturing, growing harsher angles, his eyes unrecognisable yet the exact same as the pair he adored so much. 'Where is my best friend?!'

The captain frowns, clutching his weapons tight. 'You can't see him right now.'

Armin lurches forward, aiming to throw another punch. He stumbles forward, Levi to his side, an elbow smashing into his back. The boy crumbles in seconds, elbows marring against the ceramic tiling. His spit lands and dampens the orange in front of his face, piling and growing the darkness as he cries, whimpering to empty air. His back pangs, aching, a bruise sure to form in the middle soon, if Armin can manage to live that long. It's pathetic. He's pathetic. He wouldn't've lived another day without Mikasa, or Eren.

'You knew. You knew, and you lied to our faces.' Armin can feel his voice cracking, sobbing as he lays defeated. Levi's boots step in his peripheral, otherwise unmoving. 'We just wanted him back, or at least to know what happened to him. We just wanted to know whether to look for him or to mourn him.' Sniffing with tears streaming down his cheeks, unrelenting, Armin looks up. 'You took him from us and left us to grieve.'

'Your grief kept you alive,' Levi mutters, reaching down and hauling Armin to his feet. He doesn't comment on Armin's accusatory spats, allowing the boy to use his arm for balance as he regains his standing. 'Allow it to keep you alive a little longer. I know you miss him, and

you want to rejoin him as soon as you can, but you cannot see him. It will be nothing but a distraction. You'll be killed before the both of you can say anything meaningful.'

Armin meets his eyes, the eyes of his Commander flashing in Levi's memory for just a moment. He's never seen his Commander cry before. Armin's voice is soft as he speaks, his anger quelled, simmered into a low boil. It is not his time to bubble over, heat metal and ward off touch. 'Will you at least tell me where he is?'

Levi nods, turning around. He points off into the distance. 'There.'

I'll kill them all.

I'll make them all suffer.

I'll never stop until they're all dead.

A roar rips his throat bloody. Steam rises around his body, heat boiling him alive in his own body. He feels on the brink of death, overlooking the edge of a grand wall into a fall to Hell, fiery pits and eternal damnation. Eren is used to the heat.

Trost had filled him with indignation. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair, for the Colossal and Armoured titans to make their return, try to ruin another child's lives like they had ruined his. To think they were gone moments before Eren had arrived— It breathes liquid fire from his mouth, his damaged flesh clenching. Blood evaporates from his hands, the smell of iron and rot strong in the air, his fuel to push, to keep pushing, never to stop until every single last one is dead, decaying beneath his heel.

He's never felt so comfortable in the titan's flesh before. It wraps around him, tight like a snake trapping its prey in a misleading embrace. Shiganshina's nostalgia has never before been so tempting, so close and so sought after. Eren could blink and he'd wake at home. He can imagine it now— watching his mother wash the dishes, his father work at the table, their eyes contented and peaceful. Mikasa would peel potatoes, each peeling landing on the floor with a gentle drift, like a bird's fallen feather. He'd finally rest, lull himself into a dreamless sleep, suspended in a void of nothingness, becoming apart of it, letting it merge into his skin. The concept of emptiness is so alluring. Eren would be nothing more than a memory, living on in altered minds as a sensationalised version of himself, perfect and malleable to all.

Their silence would be tranquil, ethereal, ever lasting. He could stay in that home forever. He'd only need to reach out towards it.

Eren gasps as he stumbles out of the fantasy. His body tears head from titan, ripping it across Trost to a bell tower. Steam pours from his shoulders, teeth gnaw at his legs, his blood pours down from the corner of his exposed jaw. Shame floods him as he kicks away the smaller

titans at his shins, hurling them with all his might. He'd lost himself. He'd lost himself, and killed who knows how many people trying to give himself happiness? *Selfish, revolting, narcissistic* he cries to himself, forcing his healing to focus on his arms. The flesh snarls against his raw skin, staining his face further, digging deeper grooves into scarring. Eren grits his teeth, shoving the agony down, pushing himself to keep moving. He has a job to do.

Looking around himself, Eren catches sight of another fifteen metre. It's cathartic as it lumbers through alleyways barely befitting for it, it's expression twisted into a contented resignation, drool pooling from his lips. It's filthy. It's disgusting. It's a mirror of everything Eren could possibly hate within himself. His body travels across homes, the roofs crushing beneath his weight and wrecking memories of hundreds of civilians as he crosses the short distance to the titan. The monster brings him to a garbage alleyway, filled with bags of wastage, fly-ridden and possessed with disease.

It stares at him from the other end of the alleyway, it's eyes drifting from the floor to his eyes. Eren sees little humanity in them. The dead expression on its face doesn't imply it's without it — Maybe Eren is just looking for reasons to feel more human.

Momentum flows through him like a ripple of water. His foot digs into the ground as he lurches forward, his core following, his fist reeled behind him. A roar pours from his teeth as he slams his other foot down and moves the momentum into his fist, crashing it into the titan's nape. Blood splatters across rooftops travelling streets, the head nothing more than filthy strands on Eren's hand, disintegrating atop his hot skin. Eren eases himself, staring at the collapsing body, before drifting his eyes to the town around him.

The resupply shelter is swarmed with naked bodies and little brain. Oddly, in that moment, watching small titans crawl over the stone and peer into windows, Eren imagines this is exactly what it's like to be a titan. Groups of humans, a blood fest to be feasted upon, gore begging to be spread. He begins moving off without second question, roaring as he races across streets. Zipping follows behind him, strangled cries filling the air, as the skin above his nape begins to tingle. Crystal forces a groan from him as it breaks through his skin, blood leaking through the intricate crevices. It reminds him of how filthy his hands were when he had tried to escape, when he was a kid. The dirt still rots on his hands, never truly gone, no matter how many times Eren scratches at himself to make it go away. He's filthy, tainted. There is no remedy to sin.

Blades break against the rock of his neck, but he pays it little mind. Trainees, he can tell, from their shaky swipes and their uncoordinated grapple placement. He knows well than to turn and intimidate them further. Levi is nearby, or so his captain had said— Eren hasn't felt his presence in a while, but he knows better than to go searching for him. Each second that passes is another opportunity for more casualties, more needless deaths, more inspiration for the rich in Sina to abandon the working class all together.

'What the?—'

'Jean! Don't kill it!' A trembling voice rips through the air as Eren carries forth, slowing his pace. His arms are in shreds from all the violence— He'd rather bide his time to let himself heal than rush in unprepared. Eren's aware, contrastingly, that slowing down after having ran

halfway must've sparked some idea of intelligence amongst the trainees. *Revolution is fear. Normalcy is comfort.* 'It's helping us!'

'Eh?! A titan helping us? You hit your head when your squad died, Arlert?'

Eren freezes dead in his tracks. Around him, the chaos of gore and panic blurs, his ears flicking beyond his control.

The zipping comes to an abrupt halt, the silence hanging in the air like the smell of iron accompanying it. Eren feels himself tensing in boiling, enveloping flesh, his eyes glossing over as he glances over his shoulder. His titan follows, a puppet to Eren as much as Eren is a puppet to it. A group of four trainees stare back at him, all of them his age, only two of them significant. He can feel a longing noise erupt from his throat, but all it does is promise violence. It's all Eren can ever do, in a form he's so accustomed with. He's more familiar with it's intricacies than his own human body.

Sweat dripping down his forehead, with a dumb haircut and a face resembling a horse, is a trainee standing with two severed blades. His feet are stable on the roof, but his knees shake. He grips his swords tight as he takes a step back, worrying his cheek. 'Why'd— Why the hell did it stop?'

Eren doesn't have time for this. He knows he doesn't. He was ordered to prevent as many casualties as possible, and standing here revelling in his own rekindled grief isn't helping. It isn't going to save anyone. It isn't going to stop Shiganshina from repeating all over again. It's going to kill them more than it's going to save them.

He chooses to be selfish, just this one time, and continues staring down the trainees. He knows that any movement he makes will be seen as a threat, so he keeps still, his eyes glowing in the shade of their sockets.

The other trainee besides horse-face is bald, shorter than the rest, with a hysteria in his eyes as he takes a few steps back from horse-face. He gasps as Eren fully turns, letting a slow growl leak from his mouth. In his mind, he repeats to himself. Every second passed is another soldier lost. Selfishness at the price of life. He really is no better than the pigs in Sina. 'Holy — Holy shit..! We're gonna die..!'

'No,' another voice calls out, nursing his friend over his shoulder. Eren turns to look at him, and his heart falls all over itself again.

His blue eyes shine in the wreckage of the district, body shaking with exertion as he hoists her up further. Armin. Armin, his best friend, with dreams to see the ocean, lands of ice, fiery water. Armin, who rushed up to him that morning with his book and talked all about things that seemed like nothing more than fantasy to Eren, who had become equally as deluded. Armin, who stares at Eren like he knows all his secrets, like he understands all that's happened, like he's staring directly at Eren, and not the monster he's become. Armin, who knows nothing of the creature Eren has morphed into.

At his shoulder, a red scarf drifts in winds brought on by chaos. Her hair flaps behind it, flicking around her face, serving her no justice in obscuring her face. Mikasa. She's still as

beautiful as the day Eren had to leave her. It's shocked, wide-eyed and disbelieving. Eren can see her gear is banged up— She must have taken a big fall, and for a moment, he's tempted to break out of his nape, ignore the tranquility of Shiganshina, and rush to her, run his hands all over her face and pepper kisses on every bruise, an apology following each one. He yearns like a blind man does for the heat of the sun, so tempted by his own emotions, enough to risk the deaths of countless.

Eren feels the cold release of a tear drip down his cheek, evaporating into the tight enclosure of his own body's cage. His grief comes out in the form of a clenched fist, his eyes focussing on Armin. Armin peers at him, stepping back. 'He's going to help us. I know he is.'

'Are you crazy?' The bald-headed one yells, whipping his head to Armin. He cries out in surprise as Eren growls, louder, turning his back. The crystals are beginning to melt off his skin— If they were to kill him, he'd let them. 'It's going to eat us if we don't move, Armin!'

'No, it won't,' Mikasa mumbles, clutching her scarf close to her chin. 'It saved me. It doesn't have any interest in us.' Her expression steeling, that suave composure easing her features, she releases Armin, stepping forward. Eren stares down at her, trying to stack one priority atop another. Each second wasted is a casualty made, another life lost, another family grieving if not wiped out. 'We need to get to the resupply to help us all. You need to clear a path for us.'

Eren huffs, nodding. Mikasa startles for a second, before the composure returns her hands clenching around her ODM gear as she grapples onto Eren's shoulder. It's a messy and painful landing, but he cradles her all the same, hand held beneath his shoulder in case she were to fall. He glances back to the rest. 'Jean! Connie! Armin! Let's go! He'll protect us long enough for us to get to resupply.'

Horse-face, apparently called Jean, laughs out, clutching his head. 'This is insane...!' Eren's brow ridge dips, a grumble flowing from his mouth. The message seems to be clear enough to bald-head, as he spurs into action, swallowing dry and harsh. He likes this bald one.

'Right. We don't have time, Jean.' Connie grabs onto Jean's bicep, tugging him along. 'I don't trust this titan at all, and I'm so sure he's going to eat us, but I trust Armin and Mikasa. I wanna die with my friends. Do you?'

Jean hesitates. He meets Eren in the eye, before cursing beneath his breath. 'Shit...! Fine!'

Four more grapples launch onto his body, hands grabbing onto his hair, and Eren is running off to the resupply. He moves in a manner with his hands raised by his shoulders, ready to protect and push off any other titans, steam erupting from his mouth with each thundering sprint ahead. The trainees are silent, their tension palpable. Titans begin to look their way, faces pushing past bodies to turn, bodies falling as their support trembles, facing Eren. He removes his hands, and it's gesture enough. On his fingertips, crystals weep past the thin veil of his skin, each ridge dripping with his blood. Tundra kisses his skin as crystallised planks wrap his fingers.

"That's new," he thinks to himself, looking down at his armoured fingers. "Hange will want to know about it. If I survive."

'Let's go!' Jean cries out, hopping off of Eren's shoulder. Two more zips follow no sooner after, allowing Eren to ball his fist and strike it into the first piece of vulnerable flesh he reaches. Titans roar around him, and his voice joins the cacophony.

Teeth rip at his skin. Blood splatters across the castle like pure gore, unadulterated violence and bloodshed. He feels his voice ripping, shredding with each scream he tears as his limbs are ripped from his body, chewed upon and tossed aside for more. They're never satisfied. They're never satiated. They're never resting. Pigs. They're all pigs. Their snorts and chortles fill the air as they begin to eat away at him, sending him to the ground, but the rage within him is ever-lasting.

Fight, the voice screams, consuming Eren more. It engulfs his legs and absorbs his arms. He feels its anger as an entity on its own, strangling him, filling him to his throat with its words. *Kill them all.*

He becomes one with his titan. Enclosed in complete darkness, tunnel vision targeting only what's ahead of him, what deserves to be slaughtered and ripped apart. Pigs cry as he moves, inhuman, in fashions and patterns he's never learned before. His body cries in pain, it aches, burns leaking into the crevices of his skin. Molten metal leaks into his orifices with the heat, the air in the nape unbreathable, a density all by itself. His hands and feet begin to burn away, the muscle shrivelling into nothingness, his clothes burning off of his body, staining his flesh black with charcoal. Eren's sure he'll die like this, burning to death in his own chamber of safety. The strain he's putting on himself is unlike anything he's ever felt.

Blood pours from his mouth as his titan screeches out one more cry, victorious. Steam rises around him, decaying corpses lingering long enough to start mild fires. He can feel hot rivulets of blood pour from the corner of his eyes as they fight not to roll to the back of his head, finally giving him rest. If he could, he'd collapse where he stands. His titan stumbles on its feet as it turns to look at the resupply, at the blood dripping off its stone, finally safe to enter, safe to refill. Bewildered eyes stare at him from the windows, from the broken holes in walls. They're safe. Eren feels himself slipping into a deep sleep.

A flare catches his attention. A light green, pointing in his direction. It's his own flare. He growls, forcing himself awake, pushing himself forward as he begins to approach, his muscles trembling with each step. At it's source, Erwin's calming command holds confident, watching Eren approach. His eyebrows draw taut at the sight of him, but his voice gives away nothing. He's disappointed, Eren knows, but there are tainted wrinkles of pride in his expression as he pushes forth. Erwin Smith was never a man to let his emotions lead him.

'Eren. We have figured out a way to plug the hole in Trost.'

The comforting familiarity of someone who knows him for someone past a freak of nature lulls him into security. He can feel his titan resist the pull of order, but he endures, making it listen. Eren growls, low and hoarse.

Erwin turns to point at a boulder two streets down from them. It's implanted into the stone beneath it, but has enough blood under it's weight for Eren to know it hadn't always been there. He feels sick at the thought of using civilian's blood as an oil to pick up the boulder.

Using their sacrifices, when their lives could've been so much more useful if they'd survived, had even a little fighting chance.

So many innocent lives, taken without the chance of fighting back. It makes him ill every time to imagine it could've been him if he hadn't been the lucky bastard he was. Why did it have to be him? Why did he have to be so lucky, when there were so many other people out there who deserved better, who were capable of better? Eren's thoughts were always full of so much hate, but he knew there were gentler people out there, who deserved to keep spreading that gentleness.

"When it comes to my child... it's fine if he's never great. He doesn't have to be better than anyone. After all, just look at him. He's so cute! He's already special. Because he was ... born into this world."

What a strange thing to hear from his mother, at a time like this. Eren was so young he can barely recall when she had said such a thing.

'Commander Pyxis advised for you to move the boulder from here to the hole, and plug it up. We'll focus on efforts to remove the remaining titans inside Trost. Do you understand me?' Eren nods, his body already beginning to move. Each step hurts. Each step forces more blood from the body inside his nape. He's sure that pushing too hard, pumping too much blood from his eyes, ears, mouth, or nose. It might drown him in his own crimson. But he keeps going.

He pushes forward, because it's the only thing he can do.

Levi hovers on buildings nearby as another roar rips through the air, the ground beneath him trembling as Eren digs his hands beneath the boulder. It peels the skin of his fingers backwards, revealing muscle and torn bone beneath them. They begin to steam, healing, but regardless of Eren's physical state at the time, Levi can't help but worry.

'He's pushing himself.' Petra looks over at him, her own expression set into a state of deep-set dread. She'd been recovering from the sight of a scout passing in her arms— They're both no strangers to burying their friends, but to watch their back close is a different thing. 'If he falls unconscious halfway through, the boulder will crush him in his own nape. This will all be for nothing. We'll lose Eren.' He trails off quiet and sorrowful.

'Don't worry.' Erwin's ODM zips besides Levi's watching as Eren begins to move through Trost, each step shirking his head more and more to the side. His face is calm and confident, voice steady. Eren's titan always looks as if he's trying to mimic that collection. 'He can do it. I know he can.'

The elite Garrison and some other Scouts had been tasked with keeping titans off of Eren's back until he could make it to the hole. It's a slow, gruelling process, each step that seems like Eren's last setting Levi on edge. He wouldn't let Eren die. Eren couldn't. Not when Levi poured so much of his heart into taking care of him, into making sure he stayed on the right path, learned what it meant to accept himself. It would all be a waste. Levi would have loved that boy for nothing. He'd grieve someone who wouldn't even have been able to grow up. Levi's brought back to those times when Eren was younger, more naive, when he would smile at the mere idea of being able to do something *fun*, something Levi considered torment. He's

brought back to scrubbing that scrawny child in his first soapy bath, running his fingers along his elongated spine, muttering assurances to him as he cried for his mother.

Levi had been surviving before Eren had arrived— He had no ambitions and no passions to keep living, merely an instinct that had never been buried, an instinct to keep on fighting regardless of how hopeless the odds had seemed. It was rooted deep into his blood, a curse he could never be rid of. Levi had fully expected to die in the mouth of a titan, and had made peace with it. Then Eren came into his life, and gave him reason to live, gave him reason to model after the perfect soldier and set Eren on the right path. Levi's world was dull and sparked only in his memories, drowned in grief. When Eren came, it felt as though everything was splashed in colour.

Eren couldn't die without Levi thanking him, for the first and last time.

The wind erupts in celebration as the boulder slams down in front of the hole, shoved as far in as possible. Eren's titan shakes with the force, before crumbling to its knees, hands braced on the boulder. It's as if the titan itself knows the violence is over, the panic and fear can finally come to an ease. It'll always be there, but muted, shushed like a temperamental child cooed to sleep by its mother, tears in the corners of its eyes. Levi exhales a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

Blood spills from the fifteen metre as it turns its back to the boulder, resting, panting harsh and heavy, the green in its eyes dulling.

This must be what it's like to finally die.

Eren stares up at the sky of Shiganshina, a faint, distant blur. He could push it into clarity with one swipe of his hand, removing cold frost from a warm window, comfortable in the heat of his home. Tears drip from his eyes as he stares through the glass, at the environment of Shiganshina. Eren wipes at his face, but the tears are relentless. He knows it's not real. He knows it's all a farce, preparing him to die peacefully. But it's a delusion he'll indulge himself in, just to let him die content. He's done his job.

Rolling onto his side faces him with his house, the fading memories and fuzzed details all that remains after so long. The warmth in the air from his mother's cooking cocoons him tight, keeping him alive inside his blanket. She stands by the stove, distracted by cut vegetables, the steam from the pot rising to the air and dissipating into the oxygen Eren breathes in. He takes a deep breath, but all it does is make his lungs more desperate to grasp air. It's thin, humid, and strong of iron in the nape of Eren's, titan, the only tear in the fabric of peace within these illusions.

His body screams at him to move, to fight, but he's exhausted. The titan, all his predecessors, they wait with bated breath to see when he will find that last push in him to get up, to keep

fighting, to feel the spirit of his titan thrum in his bones like raw energy. Eren can't. Or he won't. He feels as though even being forced to move around will send him collapsing, never waking. His body feels weighed down by tonnes of chains, crushing his ribs into a garbled mesh stuck inside a skin suit. At least, in the comfort of his crystallising titan, he can die in safety. He can remain a piece of history, forever trapped, forever untouched. Like resting in an impenetrable tomb of a long fallen king, at peace in the same position he was left in, centuries later. It sounds nice. Peaceful.

Something bangs against the door. Neither him nor his mother move to answer it.

His mother hums a familiar tune behind him, the sound of her knife against cutting board a lulling rhythm that counts his seconds. Her tied hair jostles with each movement of her shoulder, but the front of her is a bleary mess. He hasn't seen it, but he knows. He can't remember her face through eyes that are authentically his. The cutting is a deep rumbling beneath his skin that lets him lay on the couch, looking out the window, unable to stop the tears. His back trembles with each cry, as his mother hums, never ceasing her cutting. It's not meant to be realistic. It's meant to be good enough until Eren dies. He was such an angry person in his life. He'd get mad at anything if it meant getting out his feelings. It makes sense for a man like Eren Jaeger, who lived a violent life, to die a violent death. Gone out in a blaze of glory, trapped inside a monster, forever bound to the cages which had clipped his wings and kept him stuck inside. He'd gotten a glimpse of freedom, watching the birds swoop by outside, but could barely reach for the window.

The banging turns into rattling, the door handle shaking with each frantic movement, heaving back and forth with each plead and cry. A hinge clatters to the floor with a piercing click. Eren's eyes float towards it as it slams open, pants filling the serendipity. Hair flows in front of her face like an angel's blessing kiss, her cardigan drifting behind her as she stumbles inside, her legs uncoordinated. Eren feels his eyes squint, tears overwhelming his desire to keep open, for he fears one blink will wash her away like suds on dirty cloth. He can feel his breath hitch in his throat, the air around them bursting with the smell of ash and fresh wind. Something's penetrated his nape, he can feel it with a roar of pain that doesn't seem like this, the intrusion sharp and cutting. She looks just as beautiful as the day Eren had last seen her.

If there were anyone to kill Eren Jaeger, it would be Mikasa. He tries to smile at the thought, for death from loving hands should be like blessed rain after drought, but all he can manage is a grimace.

Her lips part in claws for air as she rushes over to him, staring down at him with tears in her eyes. Eren looks up at her, and a salty tear drips down onto his face, joining his own. They won't stop. His vision dilutes and ripples like tranquil pond water as she yells at him, words he cannot comprehend. He can't stop crying. His mouth is twisted into a horrid grimace, worse than his titan's, more ghoulish than any titan in the world. A part of him prays it wards Mikasa off enough to let her escape his prison, as the world begins to freeze, gleaming with crystal. His hearing is clear, but his brain is foggy, trapped deep inside the mind of a beast's.

'Armin told me everything!' She gasps, a sobbing wracking from her face, the expression of a goddess trying to mask itself as a demon, hiding from sin. 'Eren! Eren, wake up! Get out of there!'

Waking up.. Eren thinks about it, about embracing the ash and chaos. To reenter would be to embrace himself once more, nothing above the cacophony of war. It rips the grimace from his face, his expression washing with the dawning of reality. If he goes back out there, revealed as a monster, an infiltrator of humanity, they'll kill him. They'll kill him, and laugh as he screams for mercy. To go out there is to be a hero, rather than die like one, and the thought of it washes away any remaining will to keep pushing. The voices within him scream, grapple at the crevices of his brain and pull it apart with merciless hands, but he can't seem to care anymore.

Eren wants to cry with her. Wants to feel the grief she feels as she grasps his shoulder, trying to pull the covers from him. His body tightens around them, a hermit crab slinking back into its shell. He's never seen one of those, before. They suction at his bare skin and he welcomes the familiar feeling as Mikasa weeps above him, each pull feeling weaker than the last.

He wants to do something. Tell her, even if this is a delusion, not to cry. Not for him. It takes great effort to move, even more to push through the foggiest in his brain, but with a gentle hand, easing and soft, he drags the blankets with him like a thick robe, pushing Mikasa away. She stumbles back, letting out a brief scream, hand flying to her face. His hand is soft against her chest, his tears dripping down his face as his fingers crystallise, holding amidst the air in solitude. They tremble in pain. It hurts indescribably. He wants Mikasa to hold his hand through it, to assure him with those composed eyes and smiling lips that he'll be fine, that it won't hurt for long.

But he knows not to try. To hold her is to infect her. To love her is to ruin her. She stares at him, trembling with choked sobs. Her shaking hands drift to cover her mouth, those delicate hands who hadn't sinned enough to deserve to hold him, and she cries into them, muffled and angelic whimpers as she rushes out the house. Her footsteps fade away, and her scarf casts one last solemn look at him before disappearing with her. Outside is a heaven, an infinite white void, a nothingness that Eren craves. Bliss, beyond the reach of his arm, if he could get up.

Eren swallows the feeling of agony in his throat. They'd never been real enough to blend the line of reality and fantasy.

Someone drapes a blanket atop him. The sensation is a drug, pulling his thoughts away from his mourning. It weighs his hands and feet down by their sides. The fabric absorbs his crystal tears, soaking them into a dark patch by his face. Blood pools from the surface of his skin as he lays there, blanket placed upon blanket. His legs feel immobile, forever unmoving, trapped as stone, as with his hands. He's going to die, forever stuck in vulnerability, his expression forever twisted into an ugly sob, longing for a life he'll never get again.

His mother never stops humming, nor does she stop the rhythmic thud of the knife against wood. It's a white noise Eren wishes he could fall asleep to, lest he doesn't want to savour this peace forever.

The crystals pinch and pull at his skin until it breaks apart, allowing them to birth out of his flesh. He's reminded of flowers sprouting, how petals erupt from their ovary, blooming in the springtime sun. But he's nothing more than fungi, disease and bacteria clumped together to make a breathing organism, panting with each movement, disintegrating with each touch of a

pure, clean hand. He infects whatever he can reach, because he's nothing more than a parasite, a weed that need be removed until it can barely retrieve the strength to grow back.

He can feel it rising to his hips. He can't move his legs anymore. Eren is going to die. The details of his beloved home, the one place he'd sought the most comfort from, begins to fade, slipping past his stiff fingers. Eren weeps. It's over. It's all over, and he can finally rest. It's over, and he's never wanted anything more. He hates it.

The blankets pile to the floor by the couch, leaving him to gasp in open air.

Eren rouses in a cell.

It's not unlike the one back at headquarters. This one is damper, however, holding the heavy air of tension and suffocation. He sits up, groaning as he clutches his head, wanting the pounding in his skull to fade away. He was so sure he was set to die, crushed to death by a weight too big, or consumed by crystals until he fossilised in time permanently. But he lived. He lived, because he always manages to slip out of the narrow grip of death, teasing it in an unnamed game he's been playing for years.

Distantly, he can feel the chapped remains of blood on his face— It drips from the corners of every single orifice, and flakes away when Eren rubs a hand at them. He's pushed to realise how much blood he's lost when he looks at the pillow he rested on, grimacing at the crimson drying into brown. His clothes have been changed— The way the buttons are done, his shirt free of creases, tells him Levi must have been the one to dress him, and he eases.

Heaving himself out of bed, Eren grimaces as his bare feet hit the wet stone beneath him. It's disgusting, sending chills up his spine, but he figures he's been through worse. He feels exhausted, but his torn limbs have found the time to regenerate enough. The memory of someone tearing him of his forearms and calves, half-consumed by crystal, makes him shudder, flexing his toes and fingers. They always heal back slower when he's asleep. How long has it been?

He shuffles to the bars of the cage and wraps his hands around them, pressing his face against the metal. It's cool across his sizzling skin, a coldness soon gone as the metal adjusts to his heat. 'Heichou..?'

It's a small call, the first thing he can think of, his mind pathetically thinking back to the captain's assurance of being near Eren during the battle. It seems to be good enough, as it startles movement from down the hallway; the noise is of someone jolting awake, a chair clattering back, harsh pants filling the air as the stranger launches into movement. Eren jumps back, ready for anything as footsteps begin to descend the hallway. He scolds himself for saying anything at all, chirping when he was meant to be hiding. If this were the Underground that kidnapped him, or worse, the Military Police, he'd be done for.

Though, relief floods him as that familiar green cloak comes into view. Levi's panicked gaze shoots from the bars to Eren, his bared teeth faltering into relaxed parted lips. 'Eren. Are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere?'

'I'm fine,' Eren placates, scratching at his neck as he steps back, embarrassed at the prospect of being caught with his face shoved against the bars. 'Where am I? What's happening? Did I plug the hole?'

His captain's gaze softens, losing its edge and grit. Eren can't help but chuckle back when Levi's lips curl up in a grin, subtle but water to a dying man. Levi's smiles are a rarity, but when they do show face they are sincere; they're exotic birds that Eren has only ever caught the shadow of before they disappear. Eren feels himself ease, worries melting off his shoulders.

'You did all that and more,' Levi sighs, gesturing to Eren with a hand through the bar. Eren steps forward, and to his surprise, feels a hand land on his head, ruffling his hair. It's rare Levi ever gives him more than a shoulder squeeze, that too to placate him from a bad attitude. This feeling is completely foreign but so, so reminiscent of a life he used to live, one that feels like a fever dream. 'Good work. You did really well. Well enough to deserve a day of rest, you barely stirred.' The hand withdraws, and Levi groans, turning his head elsewhere. Eren's hair falls astray on his head, the weighing absence like a missing limb. He tries to flatten it back down into something presentable.

Levi shuts his eyes for a moment, before pinching his eyebrows. He grits out, 'Unfortunately the Military Pigs don't share our sentiment. They want you in their possession to have you executed. It'll be a court proceeding.'

Eren stills. His stare floats to Levi, right into his eyes, whereas they hadn't been before, not daring to speak to his superior with their gaze meeting. They begin to alight with a brand new fire, rage completely renewed, a sight Levi has grown familiar with. 'But why? I did humanity a favour— I saved hundreds of people. Are they seriously going to kill me for helping them, when I was the first thing ever to actually fight back against the titans?'

Levi had never liked being the one to calm Eren down from his tirades like this. It's not an issue of how relentless the anger can be, more so an issue of how much Levi is reluctant to disagree with the kid— He's right, and that fact is irrefutable. Not only could thousands have died today, or worse, another wall have fallen, but Eren singlehandedly saved an entire district from falling into a state like his hometown's. He prevented the loss of another wall, and the isolation of three other districts from humanity.

(That had been the case with Wall Maria— After the Fall, and the infestation of titans in Wall Maria, the three other districts that had also been on the outside of Wall Maria had been cut off completely from resources, farmland, supplies, and importation. No-one has been to any of the three districts in five years, and they must've— without a doubt— ran out of resources a long time ago. Rumours whisper that if the epidemics swooping their confines didn't erase all those people, then infighting and barbarianism did. The rich were under the impression that the moment the poor could no longer rely on them, they morphed into the animals they truly were.

The Scouts had proposed a trial to try and make contact with the districts, when Eren was twelve and just confronting the idea of being their shield on expeditions, but they were rejected. The King— Rather, his lackeys who spoke more than he ever did— had explained they didn't want to risk contracting any sort of disease from the districts, and spreading it to the "*mainland*", especially with the absence of their best doctor, Doctor Jaeger.

But the Scouts knew the truth behind those fat silver tongues— They just wanted to make the poor weaker, less in size. Make them more of a pest to try and eventually kill off, than a driving force of their economy.)

There would be no logical reason to kill him other than to keep control, and muffle another glint of hope for humanity. It was as Levi said five years ago, something Eren has always kept in mind. "*People nowadays don't care for revolution, they care for order and normalcy.*" It's a disgusting, shut off and conservative opinion, but it's the truth. That makes it all the more sour on Eren's tongue.

'Eren,' Levi says, raising his hand. Years of discipline overtake the soldier and he's quiet not a moment later, though the anger doesn't fade for a second. 'Even if you're no longer considered a human by the court, you are still entitled to trial. You have a chance to fight for yourself. The Scout Regiment will be your representative. It's already in legal papers, that you live at the regiment, and Erwin pulled enough strings on your birthday earlier this year to have you registered as a Scout prematurely, so our argument is fairly plain. You stay with us, we train you not to kill people.'

Eren scoffs, kicking at the floor, his eyes seething holes into the stone ground. Levi shakes his head at himself for the ludicrousness of his own statement, but it's what has to happen, what they have to pretend to be the truth for just a little while. There is no other option. He watches the boy shift his weight between his feet for a few moments, before quirkling a brow. 'Any questions?'

'What about them?'

Levi fights the urge to exhale a deep breath. He knew this was coming. He had known this was coming since he'd lied to Eren's face about it years back. He had known this was coming since he saw those two orphans in Shadis' home. He'd prepared for this mentally, feeling the weight of Eren's strings releasing from his hands, tangling themselves as he falls.

Eren's eyes rise to meet Levi's, a conflict of priority within them, almost making it seem like his eyes fight on whether to stay blue or green. He doesn't know whether to focus on the fact that Levi had withheld that information from him, or on the fact that while Eren plugged the hole, it didn't kill the titans already in Trost, and didn't it sure as hell didn't stop them from eating those trying to make it to the walls.

'What about Armin and Mikasa? Did they make it back safely?'

Levi purses his lips, before nodding. 'They will also be at the trial— They're apart of the defence, with the rest of the Scouts. They'd been advised against trying to talk to you until a verdict is reached, so I'll tell you to avoid doing the same. Don't even look at them if you really can't help yourself.' Stepping back and falling onto the wall behind him, Levi shrugs.

'Worse comes worse, and those government bastards are filthy enough, they'll execute your friends after us.'

Eren frowns, turning his gaze back to the floor. Something flickers in his eyes, however, before they fly to Levi's widening. 'Is that why you told me not to look at the crowd at the graduation ceremony? Because I'd see them, and want to talk to them?'

Levi doesn't sugarcoat a single word. 'Yes, that is correct.'

A sharp inhale fills the air. Eren's fists clench. Levi can barely imagine the anger he must be holding back for his captain right now, the hurt and betrayal in his trembling shoulders as Eren turns his back, shuffling back to his bed. His tone is softer and his tongue is bit back as he mumbles, 'How long until the trial?'

'It's this afternoon. I was meant to come and wake you up, but you seemed to be fine when I got here.' The other tries to keep the emotion from his voice— He imagines compassion is the last thing Eren wants to hear from him right now. It hurts, to see such a bright-eyed kid finally direct that despondent look to the one man who could provoke it loudest, but Levi puts it aside for now. They have bigger things to worry about, rather than the his emotions.

'Keep yourself stone-faced, Jaeger. One outburst is all they want from you to have you beheaded. Commander Erwin will try his best to have you kept with us, so you need to control your emotions. Not a single glare. Not a single scowl. Not even a whisper. Don't even think about it— It might make you pull a face. Anything other than a porcelain doll is what they need to kill you— Let the Scouts wear your emotions. Trust us to keep you safe.'

He watches as Eren sits down on the bed, staring at the floor with his palms bleeding— His nails had cut crescents in them, which makes Levi wonder if his nails are sharp, or if his skin breaks easily. Eren's expression is placed in a neutral calm as he nods, lowering his head. 'Yes, Captain.'

Levi doesn't need to hear more— He doesn't want to.

Turning on his heel, he strides out of the basement and tries to ignore the crying.

The Courtroom of the Walls is a large hall decayed at the edges with rows and rows of seats. Unfamiliar faces fill nearly every single one.

Eyes stare at him as he's taken by either shoulder to the middle, knelt upon a stone stool. Eren shivers as cold metal brushes against his wrists, keeping him chained and restricted. The two Military Police who'd escorted him move like clockwork, one holding his shoulders down while the other settles a metal bar behind him, sandwiching the chain binding his wrists, pressing it down to the floor. Eren's forced to keep his knees on the ground and his stomach

exposed if he doesn't want to cramp. He feels like a deer, tied by the ankles and rung up, ready to be gutted and left to bleed out.

The eyes of Darius Zackly are that of a wolf's, burrowing into his skin.

Eren keeps his eyes from wandering, locking them onto the emblems of each Military Regiment below the desk of which Zackly sits, adjusting himself. His aged hands, dressed in wrinkles and veins, fold his jacket and place them on the wooden table beside his paper, a glass of water opposing it. Eren swallows, realising how thirst he is. How long has it been since he'd been able to eat?

Levi's voice rings in his head, as much as he hates to hear the man. *"Keep yourself stone-faced, Jaeger. One outburst is all they want from you to have you beheaded."*

He's still not entirely sure how to process the truth which had washed over him in that cell. Armin and Mikasa were alive, and Levi knew. He didn't say a single word to Eren, though, letting him grieve two people alive, letting him reminisce over versions of them that he could've kept forever growing, not a stagnant fragment. How long had he known? Was it from the first night he arrived, or a moment before Eren had found out? How many people knew the same, how many people could he look at in the eyes and still trust after this?

Zackly's voice forces him from his thoughts. He looks into Eren's eyes, forcing him to keep contact. 'Shall we begin?' He picks up a sheet of paper on his desk, adjusting his glasses as he reads, 'You are Eren Jaeger, a soldier who has sworn to give his life for the people. Is that correct?'

The judge does not look up at him, but he does give pause, waiting for a reply. Eren's voice comes out hoarser, smaller than he remembers. 'Yes Sir.'

'Given the extraordinary material, this deliberation will be held as a court-martial; in other words, regular law will not apply in this courting. Do you understand?'

Eren gives out another feeble affirmation. Zackly continues, raising his eyes to meet Eren's. 'I have full decision-making authority in this matter, which includes determining whether you should live or die. Any objections?'

A few breaths ring through the crowd, as Eren submits, bowing his head. 'No, sir.'

'Your astuteness is appreciated, Mister Jaeger. I'll get right to the point.' Zackly lifts another paper from his desk, reading off of it. 'According to your files, and a report submitted by Survey Corporation Commander Erwin Smith, you've been living with them since the age of ten. That makes five years of your residence with the Scout Regiment.'

An aborted cry rings from the crowd, silencing so fast Eren has to wonder if he'd imagined it. Shuffles follow as eyes turn to the person who had cried out, but he doesn't want to know which of the two it was. Their voices are too mature for him to tell. He keeps his eyes on the ground. Do not look. Do not look. If there were ever a time to keep calm and force the anger from his body to expel in the form of silence, it would be now.

'You discovered your.. *condition*, at the age of eleven, and this aforementioned trait was kept from the Monarchy until you were able to fully understand and control it. As expected, concealing your existence has proven impossible; this is true for both the monarchy, and for the general public. Unless we disclose your existence in one fashion or another, we risk the outbreak of a new, civil threat.

'It falls to me to decide which regiment should take charge of you, if any. They will from there dictate your fate.' Lowering his paper with a sigh, Zackly continues, something softer in his eyes. Maybe Eren is desperate for any sense of comfort, though.

'In simpler terms, Mister Jaeger, this court proceeding is a debate on which regiment shall gain ownership of property, that being you. The Military Police Regiment, or the Scout Regiment.' Looking down, and placing his papers away, Zackly gestures to Eren's right, nodding. 'Let's hear what the Military Police proposes.'

A black-haired, middle age man steps out of the crowd, holding a sheet of paper. 'Yes sir. I, Nile Dawk, Commander of the Military Police Regiment offer the following proposal— We believe that, after a thorough examination of Eren's body, he should be disposed of immediately.'

He turns from Zackly to Eren, his steeled expression giving away nothing. It reminds Eren of the Commander, his stern gaze on his first night with the Scouts that lulled Eren into some sort of security, enough to be reasoned with somewhat. 'It's true, undeniably, that his Titan ability helped aid the resuscitation of Wall Rose's Trost District. However, his mere existence is now stirring up rebellious ideas as well.'

Dawk looks forward, to the opposing end of the hall, looking Erwin in the eyes. There's an unspoken conversation between them and their cold faces. 'As such, after he's provided us with as much information as possible, he will be made a fallen warrior of humanity.'

It's such an honourable way to tell Eren his death by their hand is inevitable. The way he phrases it almost tempts Eren to agree with him, his mind dimming his will to live. He swallows, looking forward to Zackly, observing his expression. A new voice cuts through the air.

'There's no need!' He meets the end of an accusatory finger owned by a man with fear etched in the stitching of his face. Eren bites the inside of his cheek as the priest scowls at him, narrowing his eyes. 'He is vermin that has defiled and infiltrated the walls built by God's great wisdom! Just look at his face, those marks! Those are the marks of the devil! If he is kept alive, he shall damn us all!'

The Wallists were widely ignored five years ago, but there had been a rise of them since the Fall. It's strange, how the collapse of one of the Walls seemed to have assured everyone they were ought to be praised. Eren never once considered the religion— Gods couldn't crash down with a hit, but stone could. Every time the Scouts headed into town, Oluo once whined to him after a long day restocking supplies from Sina, the Wallists would jeer them away, hurling insults and demands to cease their exploration beyond the Walls. Eren had never come into contact with any until now.

'He should be killed at once!' He grits his teeth, scowling down at the barrister holding Eren, and huffs as the judge tells him calm. His expression looks betrayed, for a moment, and at that moment Eren can't help but feel a little amused, despite everything. Martial law doesn't apply here.

Zackly leans on his elbow as he gestures to Eren's left. 'Now, let us hear the Scout Regiment's idea.'

Eren doesn't give Erwin the dignity of looking over. His life is in his Commander's hands, and with all happening, Eren's immaturity tells him it's a miracle enough he's chosen to give that power over in the first place with everything he's learned recently. The betrayal still hurts in his heart—he feels like a mutt, savouring the hand that feeds and pets him, crawling back even after being beat by that same, soft palm. He knows he can never bring himself to hate the Scout Regiment, no matter what they do, not when they raised him to become what he is.

Without them, he's sure he'd be no better a monster than those crawling all over the world. A world he will never be able to see.

Erwin's voice rings out confident in the room. Eren doesn't hear any rustling of paper, but forces himself to keep calm. 'Yes, sir. I, Erwin Smith, 13th Commander of the Scout Regiment, offer the following proposal—'

Eren thinks back to what Levi had said. They were going to fight to keep him and train him, like they have been for the past half-decade. It would be the same arrangement Eren knows like religion by now. The only difference would be Eren's surrender of humanity on paper—To the world, and permanently engraved in legality, he was nothing more than a tool, a weapon. He can feel those ice eyes digging holes into Eren, and he feels tempted to meet them, respect pulling at his skin to turn and face his Commander. But there was always the running risk of seeing someone who'd get Eren crying in the middle of the hall, so he keeps his eyes on the floor, gritting his cheek between his teeth.

'We intend to keep Eren Jaeger as an official member of the Scout Regiment, and utilise his Titan Ability to retake Wall Maria.' Murmurs erupt from the hall— Eren had forgotten the plan wasn't one that had ever even begun to have made it to the monarchy. The silence holds from both Zackly and Erwin as the whispering dies down.

'That is all.'

Eren could sink into the floor with how heavy his stomach feels, dropped like an anvil onto a stack of ceramic. It slowly crushes through each layer one by one with a piercing crack, leaving a trail of debris and dust in its wake. He fights the urge to look at his Commander, bewildered. *"Trust us to keep you safe."* When hasn't he?

Zackly frowns, leaning forward on his elbows, peering at Erwin. Distaste fights the impassiveness of his voice as he speaks. 'Eh? That's all?'

Erwin's expression doesn't falter for a second. 'Yes, sir. With his help, we *can* reclaim Wall Maria. In the past, we have made it successfully to Wall Maria to scout the damage, and with

Eren's endurance on display during Trost's recovery, we know he can achieve great things to retake humanity's land. I believe it is clear what our utmost priority should be.'

'I see.. Tell me. From where would you launch this operation to begin?' He looks further down to the left, to the Garrison Regiment next to Erwin. 'Pyxis— The wall has been completely sealed in the Trost District, correct?'

Pyxis stands with his two best at either side of him, his voice calm as he turns to the judge. 'Yes, sir. With the sediment formed from Mister Jaeger's titan, layered atop the boulder he had put down, I doubt its gate will ever open again.' Pausing for a second, Pyxis adds, 'And if I have a place to make any judgement, Eren Jaeger has always been dedicated to giving his heart for humanity, ever since he was a child. I was present when they discussed the journey to Wall Maria, and he had nothing but passion for the reclamation of humanity. Thank you.'

Erwin clears his throat once more, commanding attention. 'We hope to depart from the Calaneth District, to the east, after gathering at the Scout Headquarters within Wall Rose. From there we would approach Shiganshina by establishing a new route from scratch.'

Argument bursts from the right, startling Eren. Merchant's faces glare at him, yet yell past them, their screams reminiscent of pigs fighting for food, squealing at the slightest hint of death.

That's what they are, that voice rumbles, pigs, and nothing but. They'll fatten themselves on food they know not the original of, then die pathetic deaths to feed their sty.

Eren's mind begins to fog as he lulls into the comfort of the voice, his muscles beginning to loosen as he keens to the noise, to the all familiar anger, the supporting voice amongst all his enemies. It only takes a moment of him zoning everything out to listen to the voice for him to refocus himself, pushing the voice aside. It hisses at him, scalding against the back of his brain, before fading, its green eyes piercing through his.

He watches helplessly as the two sides begin to debate, yelling across the hall back and forth, filling Eren's ears and clogging his head with more mess than he already has within him. Zackly does nothing, watching with rising interest as the two sides exchange blows. There's little quiet in the court, few moments of passing silence as blows are reloaded and scowls are intensified, like wounds left to fester and hone infections.

Finally, Levi opens his mouth, at a merchant's complaint, cocking a brow. 'You have a big mouth on you, swine.' His voice is dead, flat and cutting, the final laugh of a gutted animal cutting its hunter with thin bones. The abrupt insult silences the rest of the court, Eren turning to the sound of Levi's voice, focusing on nothing but the captain. There's no way they'll allow Eren in their care with that behaviour, with that crude language in court. He tries to pour out his worries in his eyes, leaning towards his Captain.

His expression must sour, from the way Levi refuses to look at him, but Eren can't bring himself to be mad. He really can't. A tenderness fills him in a way he wants to deny, but he can't. It's a softness that will never harden, no matter how many blows it takes. Levi helped raise him, allowed tears to bleed into his uniform when Eren was missing normality most. He washed the grime off of Eren's labour-ridden body, kept him fed and promised to him that he

was worth saving. Worth the trouble for. No matter how much Armin and Mikasa had done for him, though he was endlessly grateful, they had never said those words to him, simply for the fact that it wasn't true— He was brash, young and hurt, clawing for an outlet of some kind, even if that came in the form of lashing out at the people around him. It got the three into more trouble than Eren could ever shamelessly admit. Eren can't hate the captain— The hate claws inwards for release.

Levi continues, 'What guarantee is there that the titans will kindly wait while we border up our gates? What guarantee is there that the Colossal titan can't also kick through the walls? It might've hit those places for less of an impact on it's flesh— We note that it takes Eren, an agile, active, and strong titan, around thirty minutes to regenerate a lost limb. What of a fifty metre slow titan like the Colossal?'

His expression darkens, his scowl intensifying. 'When you say "*we*", truly, you mean the friends your protecting so you can keep fattening your pigs and yourselves up. Frankly, I see no difference. Are you animals blind to the people who struggle to survive off what little land there is left? Do you even bother to think past what food is on your plate, and to where it comes from? How old the children are who grovel in the sun for hours on over-harvested soil to feed you?'

Pointing to Eren, Levi continues. 'With his physique and the way he holds himself, you wouldn't even think for a moment that Eren was once one of the children clawing his nails bloody to get your food. It took years of help, patience, and care to make him the way he is, and even then he still holds habits from then. The children of Shiganshina aren't helpless slaves to work for you. They're people, as much as I, as much as the poor bastards in the Underground. Pigs shouldn't be held above human life.'

The merchant stammers something back as Eren keeps his gaze on Levi. His words had cut deep and nursed his wounds simultaneously. There had always been a sense of detachment, Eren felt, when it came to what Levi thought of him. That shattered his beliefs, resting him in a soft bed, tucking him in. How Eren could even doubt Levi had cared for a moment is beyond him. The merchant begins to argue with the priest once more as Levi looks down to Eren, his frown deepening. He whispers something beneath his breath, a praise that Eren fights melting away for. His crossed arms and fixed glare hide his affection. "*Good job, brat.*"

A thudding from the table garners his attention once more, Zackly tutting his tongue as he hits the table with an open palm. 'Order! I ask that you save your personal sentiments for another venue.' He looks back at Eren. 'I wish to make something certain, Mister Jaeger. As a soldier, can you continue to serve humanity by controlling your titan ability?'

Eren leans forward, trying to fight the desperation in his voice. 'Yes sir! I can! I've worked for nothing but in the Scout's care.'

'Oh?' That noise alone has his heart dropping. 'It says here in the report of the Trost fight that upon sealing the hole, you collapsed besides it, and swung your fist at Trainee Mikasa Ackermann as you began to crystallise.'

His mind goes silent. It's a tantalising feeling, complete quiet. Eren's mouth falls open as he watches Zackly look up to the Scouts, cocking an eyebrow. He doesn't remember doing that.

He doesn't remember lifting a limb. He'd been so desperate, so driven by pain to make it back to Shiganshina, to safety, to familiarity and comfort, that he must have lost control of his titan. He hurt Mikasa before he could even give her the dignity of a greeting again.

Tears begin to fill his eyes, and he fears if he blinks, they'll fall like dewdrops tainted by parasites.

'Is Mikasa Ackermann present?'

'Yes, I am sir.'

Her voice is so different. It's deeper, even more assured than it was when they were children. Eren slips into catatonia, trying to block out her voice as much as he tries to savour it, holding it close like a precious jewel, gentle, threatening to fade away with too harsh of a breath. He doesn't feel connected to his body anymore, like he were in his titan all over again. He tried to kill Mikasa, his mind repeats over and over in his head. He tried to kill her, and he doesn't even remember it. Eren recites the words over and over in his head until his sight clears, and now he feels more mad than upset.

'Is it true that Mister Jaeger, in titan form, attacked you upon sealing the hole?'

There's a long pause. Then, a smaller, 'Yes, it's true.' Murmurs swirl in the room, before Mikasa continues speaking. 'However, he also saved my life, and numerous other soldier's lives while in titan form. He was the sole reason we were able to make it to resupply without losing half our remaining soldiers. He was the sole reason there *are* a number of soldiers in this room. I ask that you take these factors into consideration as well.'

Mikasa wants him alive?

Eren chokes down a sob, the noise coming out as nothing more than a heave of his chest. He keeps his eyes on the floor, trying to distract himself with the polished stone, but his mind keeps racing back to Mikasa's words, to everything in the past week, to his entire life being forced on its head. He was so sure the two would want him dead. He was so sure the two had thought him to run off like the impulsive brat he was, and had moved past him, surviving off of each other like two perfect halves of a rock.

'Hold on.' Dawk breaks out of the crowd, passing a paper along for Zackly to take. 'It should be noted that Mikasa's opinions may be heavily driven by personal connection to Eren. In her file, it states that Mikasa's parents were killed at a very young age, and so she was taken in by the Jaeger family. Eren and Mikasa were reported to have been in the refugee warehouses in Trost before Eren was given to the Scouts.

'Not only this, but according to both Eren Jaeger and Mikasa Ackermann's criminal records, at the ages of nine, they both had hand in two and one counts respectively of murder. It is irrefutable and immoral to deny the fact that these deaths were in self-defence, but it causes the Military Police to question Eren Jaeger's basic humanity. Should we *really* place personnel and funds in his hands, let alone the very fate of humanity?'

More whispers float along the onlooker's seats, as Eren glances over to Erwin to gauge his reaction. His brows are furrowed, a sheen of sweat gathering on his forehead, but his expression other than gives away nothing. It makes the dread in Eren's stomach coil tighter, a taut string ready to snap into two messy divisions. His anger, he can barely contain, and he fears another recollection of his past may push him over the edge.

'Her too!' Eren stops breathing. 'I bet she's not human at all!'

'Yeah! We should dissect her too just to be safe!'

Eren's chains rattle as he whips around to the merchant. The crowd jumps back at his burst to life, his shoulders straining as he yells. 'Hold on! I might be a monster, but she has nothing to do with this! Nothing at all!' His fists begin to clench in their bindings as he doubles down, even past the merchant's snide remarks.

'It's the truth! I haven't made contact with her for five years of my life, there's no logical way for her to be anything but human! You're only projecting your fear of me onto her! It wasn't only me who saved those soldiers, it was her leadership and her command that allowed so many to live. In killing her, you accomplish nothing but the death of an innocent life!'

'So she *is* a titan if you have to protect her!'

The pole behind Eren sways as he screams. '*No!*'

His voice echoes in the hall, ringing back into his head. No-one speaks, no-one breathes too loud. It's a horrifying quietude only he can break. He hears the roar of a titan, a monster deep within him threatening to break out and destroy all he's worked for. His voice aches as he speaks once more, his voice softer, defeated.

'It's not like that.' Not once, however, has his rage quelled. 'But you're all using speculation to push your own selfish agendas. In fact—' Looking up, Eren keeps his gaze level as he looks to the right. 'None of you have ever even seen a titan, so why are you all so afraid? You'll all keep living your luxury lives in the safety of the walls, without even having to consider what happens to me. You'll never know days of hard labour, or poverty, or struggle, so why does life outside of how much you can gauge your piggish stomachs matter to you?'

Scowling, Eren turns to lock eyes with Dawk, fists clenching. His body coils and releases like a faulty spring, rusty and dangerous. He can feel the voices of hundreds, all from the same body, mashed together with flesh and bone as adhesive, in his own steady voice as he continues.

'If you want your power to mean anything, come up here and finish me off yourself.'

Pain erupts through his cheek. Levi's boot shoots past his vision as his face flies to the side. He doesn't get a moment's recovery before his hair pulls, faced forward, heel piercing into his stomach. Eren hacks, his eyes tearing and his lungs struggling to remember how to breath as a knee brings down on his head. His world spins. Blood shoots from his broken skin, splattering on the floor, filling his mouth. The ground beneath him stains with red and blurs

with his tears, his body trembling with each explosion of pain, each unprecedented, each unpredictable, each merciless.

The singular moment he can bring himself to breathe, he cries out, the dirtied bottom of Levi's boot slamming his face down to the concrete. His shoulders groan with the strain, and he can feel one come out of its socket, eliciting another whimper of pain from his broken lips. It burns like no other pain.

Levi's steady voice is his only rock. 'My personal belief is that pain is the best tool for teaching discipline.' His back trembles as the heel of Levi's boot releases his head, crushing into his spine. Eren cries out, unadulterated, raw and weak, but he knows he won't die. 'I've raised Jaeger for five years. In my time raising him, I've learned that what he needs is to be trained like a dog, not a human. Dogs don't understand harsh words or stern reprimands, but they understand pain. Eren is the same. He only learns a lesson when it's beat into him.'

The boot returns to his head, tilting his face to the side, just so the two can meet eyes. Levi stares down at him, then kicks him once more as Eren's gaze dares to meet his. They speak without words. *"Trust us to keep you safe."* It rings in Eren's head like a mantra— It's not the first time he's been beat like this, but it's been a long, long time since he last had. The pain is as refreshing as it is grounding.

'You just happen to be in the perfect kicking position, Jaeger.' Eren's back shakes, white shirt staining with crimson as cuts and jabs begin to bleed through, dressing him in a regal robe.

Levi kicks him to rise, planting his boot on his face. Eren breathes harsh and begging, fighting off tears and controlling his healing to ward off for now. The pole heats up the longer his back rests on it. He prays that whatever Levi's plan must be will work—Though, a faint, doubting part of him tells him this is punishment for not keeping his composure. A mutt searching for reason to crawl back to the hand that hit it. That metaphor rings in Eren's head.

'Wait, Levi..' Levi looks over, pressing his boot further into Eren's face, placing indents in his skin. Dawk holds a hand out, shaking. 'That's dangerous. What if he gets mad and turns into a titan..?'

The boot slips off his face, then plants into his stomach. Eren coughs out spit and bile, the clear landing on Levi's boot, dripping down to the floor. He can see his reflection in his spit, distorted and stretching around the leather. Levi simply huffs, moving his foot to the floor. Just the movement makes Eren's sore muscles tense, bracing for impact.

'Don't be silly. I've raised this boy. I know what makes him tick, and what makes him listen. He won't turn into anything but a proper soldier if he knows what's good for him.' Reaching down, Levi grabs onto Eren's hair, tugging on brown strands as he turns his beaten face to look at the Military Police. All Eren can do is pant through his mouth, his nose clogged with blood, his eyes drifting in and out of consciousness. The pain drags him to Earth, yet holds him aloft all the same. Levi's glower dig into his face, but there's little show of remorse.

'Besides, you guys are gonna dissect him, aren't you? What then?' Dropping Eren to the floor, Levi steps back, taking out of his handkerchief to wipe his hands. 'According to witnesses, myself, and my squad, when he was transformed, he managed to kill over thirty titans in the

time span of an hour. That's at least two minutes per titan, abnormal or not. Not only that, but afterwards he managed to lift a boulder twice his mass and carry it over to the gate, sealing it permanently with an ability we'd been training for so long to just comprehend.

'By making him an enemy, we make him and his intelligence ten times more dangerous than if we allied with him.' Looking to the crowd, Levi says, 'but I've handled him just fine since he's been in my care. He'd eat out of my hand if I ordered him to. I can control him. But could you?'

Stepping off the bloodied pedestal, Levi begins to move back to the Scout's barrier. 'Whoever dares to torment him and train him the way I did better have thought long and hard. *Can* you actually kill someone like Eren Jaeger?'

Erwin raises his hand, looking to Zackly, keeping his eyes away from the mess that is Eren. He notes to treat the boy well once this is over, especially with the way Eren's held off on the healing, even after so much pain. The boy in question shivers as he flinches at Levi's movement, hacking bile onto the stone in front of him, his eyes blurred. The way Levi had targeted his diaphragm— He mustn't be able to breathe too well.

'Sir, I have another proposition. Eren's titan ability includes too many uncertainties and too many undiscovered traits to risk keeping in the middle of civilisation. As such, I emphasise the need to keep our previous arrangement and place Eren under the Scout's supervision in the open plains of Wall Rose, like we have been prior. He has shown numerous times that he is capable of following orders, even in moments of panic and distress.

'In addition to this, I offer this deal— Eren will continue living under the supervision of the Survey Corps, however, if there is even a moment of doubt of whether he can control his titan form, Captain Levi will kill him on the spot.'

Zackly's eyebrows raise, but he nods regardless. 'I think there is little need to dwell on this decision. My choice has been made. Eren Jaeger will be handed over to the Scout Regiment and placed under their care.'

Eren is awake long enough to hear the verdict, before his head drops to the concrete.

'Ack, he really did a number on you..' Hange dabs at Eren's face, the boy nursing a bruise that had yet to heal. Miche blocks the sunset, gazing out the window, as the four wait for Erwin to return from the courtroom. To Eren's dazed understanding, they're in the room Levi had occupied in the days leading up to the trial, told from the spotlessness of the couch.

'Does it hurt bad?' Hange mumbles, sympathetic as they tape on a little bandage, sterilising a cut across Eren's cheek. Eren shakes his head no. He always insisted to leave open cuts he

gets to heal on their own, to save supplies, but he doesn't have the energy. Hange had barely gotten him awake enough to sit upright on the couch.

The door clicks open and in come the measured footsteps of the Commander. He stands over Eren and stares down at him as Eren bows his head, ashamed. 'I'm sorry for losing myself in the court, Commander.'

'It's alright, Eren.' His hand lands in Eren's bloodied hair, ruffling despite all the matted blood. 'Your suffering allowed me to pull my cards perfectly. Your pain was worth it, and I respect you immensely for enduring it for us.' Kneeling down, Erwin smiles at him, patting his unmarked cheek. 'You have my admiration, Eren.'

Eren's lips part at the notion, and he smiles. 'Thank you, Commander!'

He can't control the full-body flinch as Levi slaps his arm down on the couch behind him. The captain sits down with a leg over the other, regal, steady-gazed and level-voiced as he turns to look at Eren, placid. 'Good work, Eren. I'm disappointed you lost your temper, but your rabidness allowed for the Commander to pull his strings and get us in a better position than we were walking in.'

Eren mumbles out, shrinking within himself, 'Of course, Captain Levi..'

'Tell me. Are you mad at me?' Levi had never been one to beat around the bush for answers.

Eren jolts, sitting up in his spot. Though, before replying he hesitates. *Is he still mad?* He should be furious, shouldn't he? He blurts out what he truly thinks, not giving his crudeness much thought. 'I— I don't know, Heichou. I don't know if I'm mad at you, or happy you saved my life.'

Levi hums, looking ahead. Nothing gives way in his gaze, something Eren has learned to grow used to in his year with Levi. 'I understand. Take your time with your decision. Today has been a lot on you.' Eren nods, keeping his eyes on the ground as Hange gets up to pack their medical equipment away.

Though, just a little bit, he shuffles closer to his captain, and allows himself sleep in his protection.

Chapter 7: Synthesis

Chapter Summary

The combination of components or elements to form a connected whole.

The recovery from Trost. The reunion of long lost friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Two weeks pass.

The recovery of Trost keeps the Scout Regiment in high spirits. Eren is no exception— He can feel the elation keeping him light on his feet as he runs around headquarters, enjoying the freedom of movement after so long chained up or restrained to his own body. Many scouts have questioned and passed Eren running laps in the courtyard, but no-one's thought to stop him. He doesn't even know how many he's run by the time a Special Operation's member comes around.

Oluo cocks an eyebrow at him, leaning against the door to the kitchen as he drinks from a pouch of water. 'Oi, Eren. What'd you do so soon to make Captain order you to run laps for hours?' Smirking, he continues, 'Don't tell me you broke another one of his cups again.'

Eren skids to a stop in front of him, tripping over himself as dust coughs in his face. He can't help but laugh at the exhilaration of nearly falling— *Him*, Humanity's Hope, tripping over his *own feet*—, keeping his legs jogging in place as he continues, bright smile splitting his face into two. 'Nope! Just going for exercise. You wanna join me, Oluo?'

The other scoffs, rolling his eyes. 'I'm not looking to run myself into an early grave.' Stepping forward, he reaches up and ruffles his hands through Eren's hair, snickering at the way it pools over his face. 'You needa get a haircut soon, Eren. Any longer and people might start thinking you're a *girl*.' Oluo manages a laugh for two seconds before he bites his tongue. Eren chuckles, and continues running laps.

He can feel so many things all at the same time. The wind in his hair, the burn in his legs, the pain rushing up his feet as they slam into the ground, driving him forward. His chest stings and aches, his lungs and heart pounding out of his chest, his mouth panting to help keep up with his body. It's all so foreign but so fantastic, so *alive*. Eren knows if he were to ever manage to reach for freedom, this would be the silver lining he could grasp— Pain, the

ability to suffer. Without it, everything is a utopia, and utopias demand conformity to prevent harm.

'Eren!' Hange's voice screams out from the balconies above him. Eren comes to another stop, his chest heaving and his smile matching theirs as they lock eyes. 'The Commander is summoning you. Get washed up and meet him in his office.'

'Yes, Hange!' Eren dashes off without another moment's hesitance.

He bursts through the doors from the courtyard into the widened hallways of the Scout Headquarters, weaving around people and laughing with them. The mood is unbelievably good— Eren's not sure he's ever felt so happy in his life. Being here for five years, he knows the place like the back of his hand, navigating it absent-mindedly as his mind drifts to memories of running down these hallways, away from Levi. It was either to prevent studying with Gunther and Eld, or it was to try and escape, run all the way to Trost, reunite with Mikasa and Armin.

Eren's mood dims, and he stumbles to a stop in front of the bathhouse.

Armin, Mikasa... He prays they won't be so foolish so as to join the Scouts. Eren hopes for this, for their own survival, but the selfishness within him knows they'll follow after him, run to the ends of the Earth if it meant to reunite with him. He would do the same, and more. They had taken their entire childhoods protecting him, warding him off from his own suicide, taking punches for his untamed mouth. Now it's his turn. If he were to ever see them in the Scouts again, it would be his turn to make sure they didn't hurt themselves, it would be his turn to make sure they had all the freedom and liberty to do whatever they wanted, shamelessly nepotistic as the two stabling supports propping Humanity's Hope on its feet.

The warmth of the bathwater greets him and melts the grime away from his body. Usually this place is communal, with the men and women separate of course, but no-one's here today. Granted, it's early in the morning. Only the higher-ups would be awake— Eren had simply gotten into the habit of following suit. When they ate breakfast, he ate. When they sat down to discuss business, Eren was made to study or train. Their schedules had made to align. Eren sits in the hot water alone, staring down at the cleanliness, the way it keeps hot. When Armin and Mikasa come here, if they do, the rules be damned, he will force the two into this bathtub and let them relax for however long they wanted. He'd even let them eat in here, something he knows would send Levi into a premature stroke. He'd do whatever they asked to atone for his abandonment, his absence, unexplained and forever unjust.

Eren wonders what they'd have to ask of him when they arrive.

Armin would ask if he'd been outside the walls, Eren thinks. Then Mikasa would cup his face, turning his skin over and over, panicked as she asks where he had gotten the marks beneath his eyes from. Eren would reach up, take her gentle hands in his, and tell her not to spend another moment worrying of it. He'd kiss each knuckle as he tells them to relax, to finally ease themselves of tension for the first time in years. They'd worry— They always did —, but Eren would insist. It was his turn to fret now. His turn to worry.

How would they have changed? They seemed to be well liked by their comrades, so would they bring along more people than just themselves? How would they take to Eren? He'd always had trouble making friends when he was younger— Too brash, too confident, too shameless in speaking his mind. Mikasa and Armin had learned to live around him, learned to combat jagged stone with calloused palms and endurance only gods would have. Eren would like to think he's changed since becoming a Scout, though. His experiences as one made sure of it.

Sighing, Eren shakes the thoughts away, cupping the water in his hands. It stains the tips of his fingers red and pruney, a feeling he welcomes as he washes the sweat and labour off of himself. Levi had ingrained into his head how to stay clean— Eren was defiant to listen at first, but inevitably gave in after weeks of merciless physical and academic training. He washes up fast and effectively, not wanting to keep the Commander waiting as he hops out of the bath, hurrying to get dressed again. His boots are ever so slightly stained with mud from all his running, but he hopes no-one will notice.

Of course, his shoes are the first thing noticed when he enters the Commander's office.

Levi glares down at them besides Erwin's desk as Eren sheepishly slithers in, giving the two a half-hearted salute. Eren shudders at the silent promise of punishment for his boots after this meeting. The three have become so accustomed to each other, the two men raising Eren from malnourishment, that formality was a rare find in private areas. Eren ever only really did it when he felt he was in trouble for something, and he can't think of anything he'd've done in the past two weeks that would warrant reprimand. So he stands, hands awkwardly placed by his sides, awaiting orders.

'As you know,' Erwin begins, glancing off to the side, picking up a thin sheet of paper, 'the trainee graduates have long since made their decision for what regiment to fall to after the Battle of Trost. We're expected to gain a number of seventy-three scouts from the 104th training unit.' Eren marvels at the number. In the past four years, it hadn't ever been more than forty, fifty if they were lucky. His expression lights up an amused glint in Erwin's eyes, one that's hastily moved back to the paper. 'They're all your age, Eren, young adults with bright-eyed expressions and experience with titans. This is a good opportunity to bond with them, to befriend people who understand you better than a squad of people over a decade older can.'

Eren, confused for the abrupt social call, nods. 'Yes.. Sir.'

Erwin catches onto his confusion with inhumane speed. 'Unfortunately the Special Operations Squad and the new recruits' squads don't often align in everyday routine. Their only direct contact is through their supervising captain, Levi.' Levi nods, seeming less and less amused by the second, unwilling to hear such praise for himself. Erwin pauses for a moment, allowing Eren to digest and catch up, before continuing. 'This year, I want you to be the new recruits' supervising captain.'

The teen can't help the noise that's punched out of his gut. 'Eh?'

Levi sneers his distaste at the crudeness, but does not comment. He's long since given up on trying to get Eren to beat those rude behaviours out of himself. 'Don't worry, brat. I'll still be

with you, helping you make your decisions. You'll simply have the final call and the first say.' Crossing his arms and leaning his hip against Erwin's desk, Levi continues, 'They'll arrive in two days, in the afternoon. We greet them at the entrance to Headquarters at sundown, sharp, show them around, then let them settle in.'

His eyes flick to Eren's dirtied shoes, the mud solidifying on the leather. 'They're not going to respect your authority if you don't show it. Clean yourself up. Don't be afraid to make them obedient, by any means you seem fitting. Yell at them. Make fun of them. It doesn't matter. As long as they respect you, but not fear you, you'll be doing exceptionally well.' Levi huffs, glancing away. 'And Eren, I know you don't tend to do anything less than exceptionally well. You got that?'

Eren nods, dazed. 'Yes, Heichou. You'll be with me, though?'

Levi look back to him, his placid stare melting, fond. 'As always.'

The trainees look as they always do— Terrified, unnerved, stiff.

Eren remembers watching them from the barracks, their first days, when he was younger than them. He hated looking at them, their uniformity, the way they bent backwards at a single word, endured hours of verbal abuse, all because the captain was above them. He felt it had to be unfair, unjust, to be subject to torment like that for simply wanting to help humanity. As a kid, those days where the trainees were new and scampering around the headquarters, he'd intentionally try to mess with them to provoke some sort of reaction other than those poorly masked looks of focus, sweat trickling from cracks in porcelain.

Sometimes he'd spook them from around a corner. It scared few, but it often just resulted in an affectionate headpat, or a strange look as they awkwardly shuffled around him. They never took him seriously, always brushing him off, disregarding each word he had. Even as a much younger person in the middle of the Scout Regiment, he had more experience than all of them combined with how the Scouts ran, but still he was ignored. Questioned, even, he recalls, people asking him how he'd snuck in, if he was someone's child. Eren always just told them he was Levi's son, that his mother had died early on, and they seemed to accept it. Rumours ran the corridors, but Levi never mentioned it, so Eren knew he didn't mind.

No matter what he attempted, none of the New Recruits had ever opened up, or looked him in the eye with more respect than one would hold for an over-excitable puppy. He'd once tried taking their boots and running off with them, to lift morale, but after a stern talking-to from Erwin, then a beating by Levi, the boot-snatching had come to a hasty end.

"They're saving humanity's land," Levi had scolded him as Eren stifled his tears, nursing a bruise on his cheek, *"and you want to stop them by taking their boots and running around like a mutt? Really? How old are you, Eren?"*

And Eren would look up to him with glassy eyes, before reluctantly spitting out, "*Old enough...*"

Eren had never seen Levi raise a hand against any recruit, really. Just him. He wonders frequently if the only reason Levi beats sense into him is because he knows Eren can come back from it just as quick, or if that's truly the only way he can ever learn a lesson and have it stick. It hurts to think about, especially as his mind trails back to the court hearing, so he's shoved it to the back of his mind and dismissed it completely.

Eren hadn't given up on trying to befriend the new recruits, but his grasps at some sort of comradeship were hastily growing fruitless. The new recruits would never open up to him, and he loathe to lay down and accept it. Levi had yelled and berated the indifference into them, and they were often unbreakable, hard and cold soldiers that only softened once they knew it was safe to breathe without Levi scolding them for it. It often took a few months, that is if they ever lived long enough for it.

Staring into the array of nervous looks and angsty scowls, however, Eren is beginning to understand why Levi is so harsh on them.

They're all so afraid of him. He can see it in the way their backs straighten when his gaze sweeps over them. Their eyes widen and their fists tighten harder against their chests, as if perfection came from the absence of his stare. They were all being judged, and he was the deciding factor between pain and bliss. It's an odd, unnatural keeping of power in his fingertips, at the tip of his tongue, which is why he wisely chooses to savour it. He's no unfamiliar to power, the way he could choose to do anything and be free of consequence, but more often than not his power comes from incomparable physical strength. After all, he could decide to kill more people than save if he so chose to. Realistically, with his hardening, no-one could stop him. It's a foul thought that comes only from the darkest parts of his selfish mind.

Levi's eyes burn into the back of his head as he clears his throat, Miche peering at the crowd intensively. Levi's voice is soft and relaxed as he whispers, leaning towards the teen. 'Eren. We need to get moving.'

Eren glances back to his captain, before nodding, worrying the inside of his cheek. 'Yes, Heichou.'

Turning to the new recruits, Eren begins his speech. It flows from his tongue like muscle memory, his mind lulling and drifting to other thoughts as he yells out the speech rehearsed in his head, one practised with Levi under the moonlight, deep into the night. He'd been forced to repeat it over and over until he didn't need the cues at all, the words burned into his retinas and scrolling down the ghostly shapes beyond their plane. The new recruits all look at him with intense gazes, perhaps falling back into the normalcy of being yelled at. Eren takes the time during his speech to continue sweeping over the crowd.

His eyes catch the familiar sight of that stupid haircut. Horseface. There's a dread in his expression masked by a practiced coolness, and besides him stands bald head. He remembers them. He wonders if they'd made the connection between him and the titan they'd clung onto during the Battle. Eren tries not to look towards Armin and Mikasa, keeping his own

composure as much as they keep theirs. Armin's eyes are watery and Mikasa's are rebirthed with a wave of life that Eren hasn't seen in them since they were children. Those two must be in good relations with a vast majority of the crowd— They stand at the front, and no-one seems to question their trembling expressions. Eren fights the smile that melts into his words as they make eye contact.

'Captain Levi and I are your supervising Captains,' Eren continues, focussing back on his words, wondering idly how much he'd been slurring through the speech he hadn't been paying attention to, 'so if there is ever any issues, any complaints, any news that you think is relevant, we are to know immediately. Secrets kept are lives lost, and in the Scout Regiment, each life is as significant as the other. Likewise, any information we receive will be passed to you if we deem it relevant.' Swallowing a breath through his dry mouth, Eren finishes, 'Any questions?'

Silence washes over the crowd. Eren feels his eyebrow twitch as he clicks his tongue. 'I hate repeating myself. If there is anything foolish you wish to say, say it now. Any other time will make me wanna beat the hell out of you.'

A hand tentatively rises in the crowd. It belongs to a blond, burly and strong, with an eased confidence on his face. He stands about as tall as the rest of the crowd if not a little taller, his lips curled into a smile, almost absent and instinctive. Eren nods towards him. 'Reiner Braun, sir! I just wanted to know what happened to your eyes?'

Eren hums. 'Reiner— Where were you positioned during the Battle for Trost?'

Something in his tone unsettles the recruit, as he shrinks minutely, hesitating. 'I was positioned towards the internal gate, sir.'

'Then you wouldn't've seen the titan who kills other titans,' Eren continues, feeling an odd sense of cockiness swelling in his chest. Levi says nothing, and Miche simply continues to peer at Reiner, so Eren feels he's earned the vague chance to gloat. 'I stand with pride when I tell you the marks below my eyes belong to my titan— I have the ability to transform into a stronger, more agile, and powerful titan than the mindless creatures roaming around, and hence given humanity a fighting chance against the monsters that have taken a third of our limited land.' Cocking a brow at the recruit, Eren asks, 'Does that answer your question?'

Reiner nods, his smile trembling off into a frown. The man besides him, taller, lankier, visibly swallows, his teeth baring with a horrified look on his face. Eren scoffs. 'I have trained years. I am the last titan you need to worry about. Any other questions?'

Horseface raises his hand. There's a vague disrespect to his tone that Eren might be imagining. 'Jean Kirstein. Why are you our captain, and not Captain Levi? You're our age— Shouldn't you be standing with us?'

Levi moves forth, his brow narrowing. He speaks before Eren can remember his preset response to the familiar question. 'Eren graduated from the military prematurely— He was, and is, outstanding in all facets of what it takes to be a Scout. Rank and status are not bound to age— I could be standing with you, had I joined the military late enough. What truly determines where you stand in this regiment is your will to live— If you chose to join this

regiment prepared to die, you might as well turn around and leave while you can still choose how you go out. Eren has nearly died numerous times but has prospered— He is more of a Scout than most of you will ever live to be.'

Eren turns to look at Levi, eyes wide. It's a little harsh, but it's the truth when it comes to the Survey Corps. 'Heichou..'

Levi glances at him from the corner of his eye, then huffs, shaking his head. 'Any more moronic questions?'

Another hand raises up from the crowd. It's a girl, with brown hair tied back and her eyes wide, slightly trembling. She looks like a younger, tamer version of Hange, her posture slightly off, more relaxed and poised. Her voice rings out confident and assured, much betraying her expression. She's unpredictable— Eren decides he rather likes it. 'Sasha Braus, captains.'

'Go on,' Eren prods.

The two cadets by Sasha's side eye her, frowning. Horseface and Baldhead exchange a look, before Horseface clicks his tongue, looking away. They seem to be set for disappointment. Eren finds it amusing for a couple seconds before he forces himself to look back at Sasha. Sasha stares at him, as if scrutinising his expression, before her expression steels. She clears her throat, her voice rumbling through the air, confident and much louder than need be.

'When will we be able to eat, sir? We rode out here too early to eat, and we're all starving!'

A few chuckles rumble from the crowd as Eren stares at the girl. He keeps his gaze long and focussed on the girl, before turning to look back at Levi, who scowls, clicking his tongue. Him obviously being no help, Eren whips back around to Sasha, whose poised manner has melted into tremours. The smiles fade from her fellow recruits. Something rattles within Eren. She's apart of one of humanity's strongest fighting forces, ready to dedicate her life to enter the ruins of humanity's largest piece of land. Honour should be her strongest driving force, but all she can think about is how hungry she is.

Eren should be outraged. Eren should be yelling her into an early grave. Eren should feel affronted, that her stomach leads her body rather than her brain.

Eren should try and stop himself as he bursts out laughing.

Immediately he feels the air lighten by tonnes. He can finally breathe again properly, inhaling fresh air to calm his panting lungs. The recruits stare at him incredulously, a few chuckling along, Levi kicking Eren in the calf as he drags him back, letting him stumble into Miche's arms. Levi barks out a few orders that makes the chatter die in a few seconds, boots scrambling against dirt as recruits hurry to follow instructions. The area clears in seconds, Sasha giving Eren a weak smile before following behind Mikasa and Armin's retreating figures.

Levi turns around to look at Eren with a hatred Eren's only ever seen a few times in his life. He spins around, his boot stamping into the dirt to begin yelling, before Miche holds up his

hand. His voice is soft, confident as he speaks, low, his eyes narrowed. 'We need to talk to Commander Erwin. Something's not right with this year's recruits.'

'The hell do you mean?' Levi snarls, grabbing the back of Eren's hood, preventing him from making any sort of escape. Miche frowns, staring down at the ground, before wiping his nose with a hasty finger.

'Eren has a distinct smell, because he's not a human. He smells like the rot of titan corpses, and the sweat of a human. I can tell Eren apart from everyone else because he smells so different. It's a titan-shifter smell.' Eren frowns, unsure of whether to take the observation as a compliment or insult. Miche continues at Levi's slow nod, the suspicion growing on his face as Miche glances over to the stables. The recruits all listen to the stable keeper argue with his horse.

'There were three other people with that exact same smell.'

'If it had been Captain Levi answering your question, he would've made you clean the place with your tongue.'

Jean sends Sasha a disproving look as the two haul what little possessions they own to the barracks. Sasha gleams, shrugging with a half-hearted chuckle. What few scouts their age they do pass all send Sasha smiles, bumping her shoulder lightly. Jean sighs. 'I'm just happy he didn't punish us all for a moron like you.'

'Well, it was Captain Eren who answered,' Sasha placates, throwing her bag onto a random bed in the barracks, the sheets perfectly made. 'He looks like he's really fun!'

'Have you learned nothing?' Jean sneers, leaning against one of the bedposts on the opposing side of the barracks, crossing his arms. 'He's just as stuck up as the rest of them— You caught him off guard. He was probably laughing *at* you.'

His mind lingers back to Trost. Seeing that titan, more human like than any other titan he'd ever seen, staring down at him, fully conscious, fully intelligent— It's hard to believe that titan is the same guy who'd brought himself to tears laughing at his glutton of a friend, the same guy who'd fallen into his comrade's arms as his captain got ready to give him an earful. He is a child in all senses of the word, and Jean sort of hates him for it. He's naive, and too unprofessional for a place like this. Maybe Jean's just used to Military Camp, and longs for the familiarity of conformity and punishment. Maybe he's trying to reject the fact that such an upbeat person with such intense eyes could ever possibly be the same titan that'd brought down thirty titans in an hour and then saved an entire town.

Eyes drifting across the barrack, Jean locks contact with Armin and Mikasa, both sharing their own hushed whispers, their eyes wide and sparkling. Jean had never seen Mikasa's eyes

glow like they are now, her smile wide, shy, but wider than he's ever seen it. All for some guy that had left them for five years. He glances away, chewing his bottom lip. It's not fair.

'Jean. You keep staring through the floor like that, you might burn a hole in it.' Reiner's calloused hand slaps him on the back, a heart chuckle erupting from his chest. 'You jealous that there's someone more hot-tempered than you? Could practically feel the anger radiating from Captain Levi.'

Jean shoves him away, his cheeks heating up. 'Shut your mouth..!'

Huffing, Jean reaches for his bed below Connie's and scowls his way through his bag, taking out his clothes and folding them with just as much ire. His friends all give him strange looks, but say nothing, turning back to their own conversations and settling. For the three years Jean's been known by the 104th training squad, he's infamous for being the angriest half the time. It's unfairly easy to get him upset about something, whether that be talking down on the Military Police or being a faux, pathetic version of a hero for public eyes. Many of them have gone to playing down Jean's recent irritability, not only due to the Battle for Trost but due to the lives lost because of it.

His frustration falters as he shoves a set of his folded uniform beneath his bed. Marco..

Come across his body had been like his entire world flipping upside down. Jean couldn't even believe his own eyes, seeing Marco's lifeless stare into the sky, his face half-missing. His blood had turned black with it's exposure, and maggots had begun to make homes in his flesh, burrowing deep in his brain, using the warmth of every memory he had to sleep through the cold nights. He hadn't had his gear, nor his swords, but his body appeared unscathed. Whatever had happened to him, Jean would never know, never receive closure for. Knowing Marco, knowing the way his smile had lit up the room and the way his ambition had urged Jean to be less of an asshole to everyone, the moron must've sacrificed his gear to help someone else.

Jean tuts, shoving his bag underneath his bunk, laying upon his bed. He stares up at the underside of Connie's mattress, trying to soothe his glower. That someone probably didn't even live. His sacrifice was for nothing. He could've been in the Military Police and serving the king as he always had wanted, with Jean by his side.

Why had he even joined the Survey Corps? Why had he sacrificed his 6th place rank, his hard work, his life's dream, to send himself right into the jaws of those bastards out there, those who won't even think twice once he's gone? What progress would he make, anyway, and why did it even matter, if titans appeared from nowhere, yet populated the world more than humans themselves did? Why would Jean force himself to face the bleakness of the outside world, when he could've marvelled at that same bleakness in the polished pathways of the Interior, with the Top Brass?

Marco's ashes still linger in the palm of his hand, whispering soothing memories into Jean's ear, having him second guess all of his decisions, all his vile thoughts. Jean doesn't know what Marco would have wanted him to do. Jean doesn't know if he would've wanted Jean to give up on his dreams completely, or go and live a naive life in Sina. Jean doesn't even know how Marco would have reacted to how Jean had wept to himself the night cremating his

corpse. But joining the Corps, fighting titans head on, making them pay for the man they had taken too early, rather than Jean, it felt like the right thing to do.

Most of his friends have gone to bed, not quite asleep. A few exchange hushed whispers, gradually growing fatigued. Glancing out the window at the end of their barracks, Jean takes in the night sky. It sparkles in his wake, the reflection of the door out dancing in the panelling of the window, tricking Jean into thinking coarse brick surfaces ever had a place in the sky. He keeps staring, trying to lull himself into a deep sleep, wondering how long he had left now, now that his fate had been ripped from his hands.

The reflection of the door brightens as it creaks open. Jean remains unmoving, scrutinising the reflection as two Scouts walk in, quiet and swift. Their hoods are up, and the taller one drifts in front, hands hidden in their cloak as the one behind them moves to each bunk, watching their expressions. Jean shuts his eyes, evening out his face and relaxing his muscles. He hears gentle footsteps pass him by, chills rising on his arms with each step. The second pair approaches him. Jean tries to keep his pupils unmoving beneath his eyelids as he hears a few sniffs. He can feel the air being ripped from his cheek, the heavy exhale of a passed inspection tingling his ear. It disappears, letting Jean feel the dampness on his skin.

'Have you determined which three?' He recognises that voice as Commander Erwin's voice. A calm, collected and steady thing, rough with years of tribulation and prevailing hope. The man whispers in such a way that his voice comes out as a low hum, like a siren trying to lull the recruits to sleep.

Jean slowly releases his held breath, happy to be out of the clear. The voices fall silent as he shuffles, unrestful to them, laying on his side and smoothing out his face once more.

'Yes, sir. It's primarily from this area here. Those two, and that one there. The two here, not so much, likely because of Eren.'

'And are you sure?'

'I've yet to fail you...' A pause trail in the air. Footsteps curl around the back of Jean's spine, shattering the silence one step at a time as Jean tenses. His fear might be audible through his chest, he fears. 'These two as well. They're the same— Faint, but because of contact with Eren; I wouldn't want to put anything past any one of these recruits, however. It's hard to tell, because they've all been so close to each other.'

Jean's heart drops all the way through the floor.

'...Very well, then. We will discuss this with Levi's Squad tomorrow night. I will instruct Eren and Levi to keep an eye on them. Do not give away anything.'

Jean? Jean is suspect for something, he realises. Suspect for something he doesn't know of which at all, something that can land him in deep, deep shit should he make the wrong move. He has no clue what it is. What it could be. He can't think of anything he's done wrong, done treasonous. And what of Connie? The guy was a moron, sure, but he was a loyal moron, good on his word. He wouldn't do anything bad for humanity even if it meant saving his own life. He had the brain of a loyal dog.

And without further word, the two turn around and close the door behind themselves. Jean opens his eyes again, trying not to burst out into hysterics. He just overheard a ploy in the upper ranks of the Scout Regiment, and if he gives anything away, he's bound to be slaughtered right where he stands. The teen spends a few moments covering his mouth and glaring at the door, as if they were to make a second appearance, before sliding that hand to his hair, brushing it back between his fingers. *Shit.*

Turning around to look at the barracks behind him, Jean takes a mental note of who sleeps there. Reiner, Bertholdt— Again with the bizarre positions—, Krista, Ymir, Mikasa, Armin, and two more scouts that sleep directly behind Jean. Three of them were responsible for something, and two— Which Jean honestly does assume is Mikasa and Armin— not so much. Jean wonders what it could possibly be, what they could've possibly done. Those six were all apart of the top ten ranking, either trumping others with their brains, their resilience, or with their physical prowess. It's not like them to cause trouble, much less enough to have the Commander sneak in in the secrecy of the night.

Jean startles as the door slips open, a much more darker shadow slinking in. They leave the door partially ajar, settling it in its spot with care, glancing outside the door for a moment before hurrying inside. Unlike the Commander, they hold a lot more urgency, moving louder, their clothes rustling. As they pass Jean, they falter besides him, turning to look down at the recruit. Jean has to duck his head to see past their shoulders, Connie's bunk hiding them.

Viridian eyes stare back down at him, taking him apart with each passing second. 'Why are you awake, Kirstein?'

Jean swallows, shrinking back. 'Apologies, Captain. I just— I heard the door, and I'm a light sleeper.'

Eren nods slow, chewing his bottom lip. 'You don't have to call me Captain. Makes me feel old. Eren is fine.'

Jean can't help himself but feel overly suspicious. Was Captain Eren in on the ploy, to figure out who was in trouble, and for what? Jean of all people should know looks can be deceiving when it came to Scouts like Eren and Erwin. Eren was a titan, for god's sake, a fifteen metre hulk of a titan, and Erwin could go from polite and comforting to cold and stern at the drop of a hat. Was getting Jean to loosen up intentional, a tactic of getting him to slip up and confess to a crime he wasn't aware of?

But why would they do that, when intimidation and terrifying the recruits into submission was much faster, much easier. Hell, Jean would confess to a crime he'd never commit if Captain Levi had said he did it. On the topic of that, if they wanted Jean to confess, why didn't they bring Captain Levi, period? Why did they bring the— clearly amateur— Scout along who burst out laughing in front of a crowd that was meant to respect him? Why did they use Eren, who Jean wouldn't take seriously even if it meant being discharged from the Survey Corps?

Even more confused than before, Jean hums, giving Eren an awkward smile. He's realised that he's been silent, lost in his own thoughts for too long. It's apparent that Eren noticed too, awkwardly shuffling on his feet. 'Eren, then. Forgive me if I'm overstepping, Eren, but— Ah..

Is there a reason you're in our barracks at this hour? Surely whatever you wanted to know or find could've waited until tomorrow.. Surely you must be up earlier than us recruits are.'

Then, toeing the line between curiosity and blatant suspicion, Jean trails off, '...Is something wrong?'

But the other doesn't falter for a second, doesn't flinch nor hitch nor hesitate as he shakes his head, waving Jean off. 'Don't worry about it. I'll give you a helping of my desert tomorrow if you don't speak of this— Truthfully, I'm not supposed to even be in here.' Glancing around, Eren takes in the recruits, analysing each from where he stands besides Jean's bunk. 'Where are Mikasa and Armin?'

Jean points behind himself, more out of instinct to follow order than compliance. When he catches himself, he finds himself cocking an eyebrow, conspicuous. 'Why do you want...?'

'Think of that extra desert, Kirstein, and go back to sleep.'

Without another word, Eren is hurrying off. Jean, baring his teeth at the captain's back, watches as he hurries to the window, shaking Mikasa on the bottom bunk awake, before hopping on the ladder and jostling Armin. The two rouse gradual and slow, murmuring confused whispers as Eren drags them by the hand towards the door. Armin casts a glance at Jean, yet to look ahead of him, but Jean just shrugs, laying back down. Whatever they must have done to capture the attention of their Commander so early on is none of Jean's business.

Mikasa and Armin were always peculiar like that. They were a duo that lacked a third, everyone could see it in the way they acted. An integral was missing from their world, noticeable enough to rock them, damage them to the point of coldness. Mikasa was one of the hardest workers in the Trainee Camp— She rarely spoke, with a dead expression on her face, her jaw buried in her ratty scarf. Armin was a bit more lax, a bit more social, but he still withdrew, holding his emotions at face value. They made a good team together, but their cogs weren't oiled well enough to be perfect.

Ever since the graduation ceremony, they'd changed. Mikasa spoke more and Armin was even more open. They had told whoever cared about that missing piece in their machine that they'd lacked throughout their childhood— *"Our brother,"* Armin had said, lamenting during dinner one night, swirling his spoon around in his bowl, *"who was temperamental, reckless, and suicidal, but with a heart of gold. Once he stuck his mind to something, it was hard to snap him out of it."*

With enough prying from interested gazes, Armin had indulged them in the story. He hadn't told them his brother's name, simply that he was missing, and had been for around five years. They'd survived Shiganshina, they'd survived weeks of cruel labour for food, and one night, he'd just disappeared. They went to sleep, and when they woke up, his bedroll was empty, his shoes gone, but not his leftover rations nor his ration card. It was as if he'd gotten up, put on his shoes and left, expecting to make a hasty return. The guards said they saw him walk out to relieve himself, but got kidnapped and couldn't be saved in time. Though everyone knew the guards were liars when it came to the poor.

Armin and Mikasa had been so shut-off about their brother at the start of Training Camp. Even the mention of their mourning expression was enough for Mikasa to have hurled her fist

once. They both looked lifeless, corpses driving with a singular goal to reach before collapse — That'd been to join the Scout Regiment. Jean had called them insane for it, which now, he scoffs at. But right after the Graduation Ceremony had ended, Armin had burst into tears with Mikasa standing besides him. They both had wept and refused to say anything when concerned glances flew their way. Jean had figured that the two crazies had lost their minds to the point where even the presence of the Commander and his soldiers brought them to hysterics.

Jean thinks about it some more. He hums to himself as he recalls all of this, staring up at Connie's mattress. Then he puts two and two together, and sits up so fast his head rams into the slats. '*Holy shit.*'

Their *brother* was the *titan*.

Eren shuts the door to the recruit barracks, trying to hide his excitement as Armin and Mikasa rub the sleep from their eyes. His bottom lip cracks under the pressure of his teeth, a small cut that begins to kiss gentle steam to his nose and upper lip. He had planned to pull them aside tomorrow, but he couldn't've waited. He knew he couldn't, knowing they were so close, just beyond a crooked finger's reach. He was a flame, singing the environment around him, and they were his dry bush, a fuel to the fire that seemed to be fated for each other since the beginning.

Armin is the first to blink to clarity, looking up at Eren. He stares into Eren's eyes for a few moments, trying to identify the member. His rapid blinks make his eyes seem tinted with his blond eyelashes, glistening and pale, but they still, like the settling of a butterfly on the perfect flower. He gasps, Eren's reflection sparking to life in his glassy eyes. A habit he'd never seem to be rid of, his hands fly to his mouth as he stares at Eren, his eyes beginning to flutter shut as they wash over with tears. His body is idle for only a second more, before, like a magnet, he is thrown into Eren's arms, his mouth twisted into a permanent sob.

Another body wraps around them, embracing them with strong arms. Eren pulls his head back, blinking through fat tears as Mikasa clings to his torso, her lower face hidden by her scarf. It's a third layer, making them complete, forever keeping Eren in place, never to disappear again. Eren pulls a hand out from the embrace to hover over Mikasa, his fingers calloused yet forever delicate with her. He brings his thumb to her cheek, wiping a tear away. The notion is enough to bring Mikasa to even more tears, her weeps open-mouthed, a bottle with too much pressure finally pulled open.

They stand in that spot for what feels like hours. Eren savours each and every single second of it. If time had come to a stop, he'd never want to leave, permanently confined in their arms, arms he's craved every single day, arms he's pretended to be there, lifting him up when it seemed hopeless to push himself up. With them, he feels enclosed. Trapped. Warmth surrounds his limbs and keeps them pinned to the floor as cries begin to fill the air. Eren

thinks, just for a moment, that he's in his titan, staring at the reverie of home, wanting to reach out for it with trembling fingers.

Wetness drips from eyes and into his clothes, streaming down his cheek and their cheeks as an abrupt silence overcomes them. There's no words to be spoken. Eren isn't sure he could even think of any to say. They move as one collective being, a puzzle completed, crying together, smiling together, finally together. His mind has been so clouded with thoughts both his and before him, clogged with thousands of passing ideas of what would happen if he could just finally let go— They're all silent now. They've been eased, the sombre tears of a newborn fading into tear tracks on pure skin.

Eren knows nothing will be the same. He knows there will always be a distance between them and him, another wall he's yet to try and earn his way into. They spent five years suffering together, while mourning his absence, and he never once took a good initiative to try and find them, to try and negotiate them to join him. He was pathetic, longing for something he could've gotten, while they moved on, grew stronger, more capable, more close. He'd dreamed for this night for years, and even if it's arrived, it won't be exactly as he imagined. Because the versions of them in his mind are long gone, long faded into bad memories and distant fever dreams. They're different now, and so is he. They won't be exactly as they were before, but the embers of their friendship persists, burning with new land to crawl upon.

'I missed you,' he can't help but choke out through his tear-struck face, his voice garbled. He's not even sure the words are legible through his cries, but he doesn't care. His voice is raw and unfiltered, unmasked as he cries to them, melting into their bodies. 'I missed you both so much.'

Armin wipes at his own face with his sleeve, trying to keep a brave smile on, though his lips tremble and his crying drips down onto Eren's face, joining the cascade of crystals melting into their cheeks and shirts. He'd become braver since Eren had last known him, braver and more confident, no longer the trembling child hiding in dark alleyways. He's kept the wonder of childhood and the curiosity he's always had, rooted deep into his blood, yet he's grown, strong and fierce. 'We're here now, Eren.'

Eren nods, perhaps a little frantic. He believes them, he believes them more than he's ever thought possible. There's no doubt in Armin's words, and it's infectious— It spreads to Eren's mind, finally waving away years of fog and mist, clearing his brain, opening a window to let in fresh spring air. No action he could take could possibly convey even a fragment of his confidence in them, in Armin's words; in vain, he tries raising his hands to hold them, anywhere he can place his hands. He grips Armin's hand tight, Armin reciprocating with as much passion, and with his other hand he cups Mikasa's cheek, warm and soft.

With another choked heave, Eren finally lets his smile break through, intercepted only by his tears. 'Welcome home.'

And to that Mikasa lets out a loud sob, her eyes clenched shut as she grips the scarf wrapping her neck, dampened as she cries. Her weeping is unfiltered and unkempt, the other two sitting up and allowing themselves to follow suit, crying together to make up for the five years they'd been unable to. Eren feels like a little kid all over again, crying over such small things,

frustrated over the most forgettable happenstances, yet kind and bright with the innocence and naivety of someone who had never seen the worst of it all. They weep in tandem, like one conjoined being, for that's often what they were— They shared thoughts, beliefs, shared hope that Eren had the barbarianism to think had kindled off into nothing but a dull warmth. Without one of them, the other two crumbled off, bridges cut without their supports.

Standing with them in the middle of the hallway, Eren quickly realises he's more exhausted than he ever thought to have known. He speaks with teary eyes and a strangled voice, trying to seem strong, trying to seem grown, but he still feels like a naive ten year old with a world to explore. He's no longer that kid, nor will he ever be again, but he doesn't need them to worry. He needs them to rely on him, to let him protect them. For this, although reluctant, he peels away with them, keeping his hands in theirs. They hold onto him so tight, it feels like they were trying to let him absorb them. 'Cmon. We can sleep in my room.'

Truthfully, it was not Eren's room specifically. It was a spare room for guests who'd come to stay overnight, but Eren had been booted from the barracks ever since the new recruits had come. The place was small but cozy enough for Eren to have gotten comfortable quickly, never having had his own room before. It felt claustrophobic, like a more mocking version of inside the nape, but now it could feel just a little bit more like home. It begins to feel better than the warmth of his mother's cooking, or the rhythmic tapping of her knife on the chopping board.

That night, the three hold each other tight, this time determined not to let each other go ever again.

Jean had been thinking about what had happened two nights ago.

Captain Eren coming in and stealing Armin and Mikasa, only to leave in haste— Of course he heard them crying, seconds after he realised just who Eren was. It's a damn miracle no-one woke up to it. Eren didn't appear so misguiding anymore, so two-faced, where Jean thought he was faking his enthusiasm to mask the fact that at a single wrong intention, he could very well dismantle all of humanity if he wanted to. He just appeared to Jean like a kid, despite their similar ages. A kid who missed his friends, a kid who made a dumb decision to run off and is finally earning them back. He doesn't think Armin ever explained how Eren disappeared, simply that he did.

A lot of people probably found it bizarre during breakfast when Mikasa and Armin had moved to a table far off from the new recruits' one to the corner, where Eren restlessly awaited their approach. Captain Levi had walked over briefly to Eren, muttering something inaudible. All Eren did was frown and wave him off, which he'd received a smack to the head for, but Levi did end up moving back to his own table, keeping Eren in his line of sight. The 104th training squad had all exchanged weird glances, Jean feeling obligated to explain. So he did, shallow and full of *"But I'm not sure, don't believe me"*s, but he did. The 104th

seemed to like Eren even more than they had before, which would come to be problematic when they'd have to explain why they were such big fans all of a sudden.

Jean had just finished warning everyone not to speak a word of anything when Section Commander Hange had risen from their seat, garnering everyone's attention. Their eyes sparkled and their smile held full of malevolence as they had announced for all new recruits specifically— *"And those who'd like to watch, too—"*— to line up outside in the training field. The sun had barely risen over the horizon an hour ago, so people calmed, going back to eating in peace. They'd barely even been able to dig in to eat breakfast when Hange had announced that it would take place right after breakfast, so to eat fast. In the time Jean had looked up to listen to Hange, Sasha had stolen his bread roll, so Jean was understandably pissed.

Which is why Jean now kicks up the dirt while waiting in the heat. Ymir casts him an irritated look, raising an eyebrow. 'Oi, stop that. You're going to get dirt over Krista and I's shoes.'

'You'll live, it's just some dirt,' Jean bites, intentionally digging his heel in the soil a little harder than before to send a bigger cloud wafting in the air. Ymir's fists clench, and she takes a minute shuffle away from Jean.

Honestly, he doesn't know why he's so angry. Maybe it's because of Sasha. Maybe it's because Mikasa, the girl he's been doodling beneath his bed covers like some little girl, is suddenly smitten with some guy she's only been reunited with for a week. Maybe it's him being in the Scouts at all, him refusing to accept he'll die to some dumb titan. Maybe it's Marco, seeing his corpse, feeling appalled for him that he died in solitude. Everything in these recent times is culminating, and Jean doesn't know how much more he can handle before he flips out and gets himself killed.

Blinking himself back into focus, Jean startles as Eren's eyes meet his. They're a stunning teal, burrowing deep into his hazel, analysing his expression. This is the first time Jean's ever managed to get a good look at Eren, at the red skin, almost resembling raw muscle, lined in streaks beneath his eyes, at the curve of his cheeks, making him look more baby-ish than threatening. Jean knows he's dangerous, however, that at one wrong move, one misleading tease, he could be killed and marked down as a traitor before anything. His mind constantly keeps moving back to that night, to Commander Erwin telling his soldiers to keep a close eye on everyone.

Jean, recalling their encounter that same night, tries to offer a weak smile, but it trembles off as Eren frowns, shaking his head. His voice is low enough to be heard by only the two, but his stance imposing enough to make Ymir and Reiner at either side of him stiffen. 'Zoning out will do you no good on the field, Kirstein. You'll be killed and get others killed while thinking about whatever you were zoning out for. Have you been listening to a word I've been saying?'

If Jean's learned anything training under the toughest during his military camp, it's that lying will get him in a situation ten times worse than if he had just told the truth. He thinks back to what had happened to Sasha on their first day, and frowns— She'd told the truth, but he'd loathe to imagine what would have happened to her if she hadn't. He's sure with a captain that

had graduated prematurely from the Scouts, the punishment would be far more worse than running laps. 'No, sir. Sorry.'

Eren steps back, shaking his head. He casts a sidelong gaze at Jean, before continuing, 'Alright, since one of you weren't listening, it means all of you weren't listening. We do this tradition, if you will, every year. It's no secret that the abrupt rise of success in Scout Expeditions recently has come from an excelling form of protection, which is a fifteen metre sized titan. There's still a level of caution that comes with being so close to a real titan, something we all feel, which is why today, we will be running a few exercises to accustom you to working with my titan. Understand?'

A series of cries ring from the group, resulting in a smug smile growing across Eren's face. He trails his gaze across the line of recruits once more, narrowing his eyes at certain people. They stop at Jean, where he tilts his head to the side, before moving on. Whatever Jean might've done, to be called out that night, he mustn't be making a good impression of himself.

'Just remember,' the teen adds, 'it is still me. I am fully aware of myself. I will always be in control when it comes to my titan, so you have nothing to worry about— If I grab you, it is to stop you from hurting yourself. However, if you retaliate or go for my nape for your own protection, because you genuinely think you are in danger, you will not be punished.' He chuckles a little bit, before adding, 'I'd warn you to watch out for the Special Operations Squad before trying to behead me in my own nape, though.'

Without waiting for another order, Eren turns around and begins hurrying out to the open plains. Levi clicks his tongue aloud, turning to Eren. 'Oi, Jaeger!'

Eren skids to a stop before whipping around, his stiff posture enough of a salute between the two. There's even a little grimace on his face, as if Levi's summon inconvenienced the other. Jean cocks an eyebrow at the informality— If he'd even tried to address the Captain without saluting, he'd be beat until no tomorrow, and then some. It reminds Jean that Eren is not the same as him, not any typical soldier— He was raised by the best-of-the-best, and then granted fantastical abilities atop it. He didn't know what it meant to lose, simply because he never did. His life had been on the incline ever since he'd been born, and Jean envies him for it.

Levi pulls at the hood of his cloak, raising an eyebrow. Eren jolts, nodding as he rushes to undo his cloak, wrapping it up with a lazy motion before tossing it on the floor. It's clearly in Levi's disapproval, but it seems to be good enough for Eren to run off again. A member of Special Operations, the blond one, hurries forth and snatches it off the ground.

Jean takes note of the absence of people with Eren, how they all hide in front of the recruits, as if shielding them. He glances over to the Commander, to Captain Levi standing besides them, and jumps when he finds them already staring at the recruits. Gauging their reactions. There are a group of suspects amongst them for committing a crime that Jean does not know of, and none of them are above showing their suspicion aloud. Erwin's gaze is more calculated than the bite of Levi's, analysis rather than immediate distaste. Jean tries not to let his discomfort become apparent, worrying the inside of his cheek as he keeps his eyes ahead. They're not protecting the recruits from Eren— They're protecting Eren from the recruits.

'Ahh, this is always my favourite part,' Hange calls out, waving their hands around as Eren comes to a stop about 50 metres away, looking back to the group. He's nothing more than a collection of colours, details indecipherable. Jean wonders, with the cloak, how well they could blend into nature if they try hard enough. Eren alone looks enough to blend into the shadows and tones of a grand forest, if the situation ever came to it. Jean hasn't seen many in Wall Rose, and he never really went to Maria as a kid. 'The transformation is always so interesting, don't you think, Levi?'

'I think it's dumb,' Levi snaps back, 'that we use half his energy just to get the other brats mentally ready for something they must've already seen. Being a scout means to be adaptable to any scenario, not ones we've rehearsed.' He casts a cruel glare at the recruits, who collectively stiffen at his sudden grasp of attention.

'Such a spoil sport, as always,' Hange laughs off, reaching to their side.

They withdraw a flare gun, loading it, before holding it up. They glance back to the group, pressing their ear shut, an action quickly followed by the ruffling of clothes and Jean's world muffling. A light green flare shoots into the sky. It leans towards the side, before sputtering off, its colour fading into the bright sky around it. Jean turns down away from it, then to Hange, cocking an eyebrow.

The sky darkens into a sunset orange as it screams in pain. Lightning shoots down from punishing clouds and to the field in front of them. Recruits around him cry out as the ground trembles in fear, Jean himself stumbling before Reiner catches his arm, keeping him upright. Jean looks up at him, incredulous, before his expression falls confused. Reiner doesn't look horrified, or confused, or anything of which Jean is feeling. He looks enamoured, like he'd been reminded of something he hasn't seen in a long, long time. His face morphs into discomfort as the lightning calms, and in its place screams a roar that Jean's not unfamiliar with.

There, in the distance, stands a titan. Those who hadn't seen it in Trost call themselves out as they panic, stumbling over their feet to get away. Hange pumps their fists in the air, grabbing their grapple guns as they hurry out. Jean can feel each wave of movement with each step the titan takes to lumber towards them. Its eyes shine a bright green, each movement of its head leaving a linger path of viridian behind it, face masked by long hair that trails to his shoulders. It's the perfect physical condition, the perfect weapon. It walks like it knows it's intimidating, like it knows it's unkillable.

Jean suddenly understands why they've been calling Eren Jaeger *"Humanity's Last Hope"*.

'Isn't that—' Connie trails off, laughing nervously. 'Isn't that the titan who helped us in Trost?'

'It is,' Armin disrupts, his expression laced with sweat. 'That's why I knew we could trust him. He's conscious, he knows who we are.' Mikasa stands by his side, her thumb running over the fabric of her scarf, slow and careful. She analyses each of his movements, committing each muscle to memory. That was their brother, the man they'd lost for five years. Armin idly taps his chin, mumbling to himself. 'I'm just surprised they managed to keep it hidden for so long — Its entrance isn't exactly subtle.'

'Was he like this when you were kids?' Jean blurts, smacking himself mentally when Armin and Mikasa's heads shoot over to him. They both look unsettled, unused to being read and analysed. He decides, hastily, that the secret is already out, that he has nothing to lose, and doubles down. 'You said he went missing when you were ten. Was he like this as a kid?'

Mikasa purses her lips. Her voice flows like silk on sensitive skin, perfect as her. 'No— Eren wasn't— He wasn't a *titan*, he was a normal kid. This has to be something that they did to him in the five years he was gone.' Something eases in her tense expression, as she softly adds, 'But even without the titan, he's changed a lot. It's good change.'

Armin manages a weak laugh, trying to lighten the mood, trying to distract from the fact that their brother had managed to become a human-titan in the five years he'd been gone. The way he recalls their childhood, he speaks like it were a narrative, a fantasy land unheard of in reality. 'Yeah. He was always so angry as a kid, so we always had to worry about him. Now it's like all he can do is worry about us. I remember that one time he kicked that Garrison guard, and we had to drag him away while he was yelling with a bloody nose.'

'Awh, cute,' Sasha trembles out, hiding behind Armin as the titan comes to a stop in front of Hange, about ten metres away from them. 'So if he chooses to eat us all, he'll protect you two and hopefully us if you beg hard enough.'

'Calm down.' Jean reaches over and yanks Sasha off of the other, embarrassed for her since she seems to lack the self-respect to do so for herself. 'He said it himself. He knows what he's doing. He's been in that titan longer than any of us have been in the military.' He doubts his own words, but it seems to toughen Sasha up enough to not want to cower at the first sight of Eren. How Jean wishes his words could have as much of an effect on him as they do on morons like Sasha and Connie.

'Alright,' Levi calls, clapping his hands. 'This is the titan. He is your regular titan, except he has the mind of a human and abilities that no other titan has. In saying that, I mean that he can regenerate if you do not hit the nape, where his human body is, and he can keep going for extended periods of time without the need for sustenance or the sun.' His expression darkens as he continues. 'Although, regardless of what Eren had said to you, no-one is to get near his nape. No matter how bad the situation gets, I do not trust a single one of you to cut him out. You call upon a Special Operations squad member, Hange, or Commander Erwin. No matter how good your accuracy is, or how shallow you think you can cut, you are not to try and cut him out yourself.'

The titan growls, as if summoning attention. Eyes turn to Eren as the titan sinks to its knees, reaching above the crowd. Beneath them, the ground vibrates, sending its shivers up their bodies. Eren seems aware of his size, but not the intricacies, not the way they all stumble at each of his movements, sweat at each of his breaths. Who could blame him for it? His hand is as calloused as his human hand, tough, square, and imposing. Bodies stiffen and begin to shuffle out of the ease of his hand's shadow. The heat beats down on them, but it is proof that there is no cage over their heads.

Eren's hand descends down on the crowd, drawing a few more cries. He curls up his fingers sans his index, as if to point or nudge at something delicate. Jean cocks an eyebrow,

wondering what Eren could have forgotten to do that was so important that he'd had to do it as a titan.

The confusion wisps into horror as the finger descends on Levi's head.

Levi bares his teeth, glaring ahead of him as the finger gently pats him on the head, ruffling his hair. His eyes darken with rage at each pat, growing more and more intense with each movement. A few laughs fill the air, and even the Commander chuckles, squeezing Levi's shoulder. Hange, equally as fascinated as amused, laughs as they whip out their notebook, jotting down the action.

If joy was an expression Eren could wear on his titan, that would be it. From closer in, his eyes don't glow like a cat's, they're more human appearing. Jean can see the similarities between Eren's human eyes and his titan's eyes, if they weren't completely identical. He watches as the eyes narrow at Levi, contented, before his hand drifts away from his captain and to Hange. Hange holds their hands out, screaming with ecstasy as Eren picks them up by their torso, pinching them between his index and thumb. Hange's assistant, Moblit, helplessly yells for the two to be careful, but gives up rather quickly. It must be a common occurrence, but the sight of a titan holding a human by its torso is no more comforting.

'He knows how gentle to be when grabbing a person,' Levi continues, his teeth grit, 'and he knows how rough to be when someone gets too passionate about trying to murder him. He'll swat you like a fly if you try to attack him, but he won't try to kill you. It's me who'll be doing anything of the sort.'

'Alright,' Hange claps up from the palm of Eren's hand, 'allow us to familiarise you with the various things Eren can do.'

Jean stares at the two as they perform a series of moves, a combination of titan and ODM gear. Eren does it all with practiced fluidity, ease in each muscle as he completes each task requested by Hange. As they do, Jean notices the repeated looks tossed in the recruits way, an unease settling in his eyes as he turns back to Hange, seeking approval. Jean wouldn't be surprised if each glance is thrown to Armin, or Mikasa. If he'd been separated from his friend for five years and all of a sudden his friend could turn into a horrifying titan, he'd be a bit antsy watching the titan in live time, too.

The last thing they put on display is Eren's hardening. Connie sends Jean a look at the name that makes Jean stab his heel into Connie's foot, eliciting a loud cry that draws a few eyes. Jean remembers witnessing the titan freeze in its place, slouched against the rock. Its crystals had jut out like spiderwebs to either side of the boulder, acting as an impressive adhesive for the boulder to stay in place. It wasn't exactly like titans could push the boulder on its own away, but Jean wasn't going to complain about contingencies.

'According to Eren's recounts, to crystalise is completely painless, so we've been lenient with its usage,' Hange calls aloud, 'Think of it as bacteria leaking from a painful pore, oozing out.' A few grimaces plant into the crowd. 'We've mastered his ability to harden specific parts of his body, like his fists, legs, and nape, and we're currently in the process of practicing how to fully crystallise his titan without trapping himself inside. Being in a crystallised state for too long will cause the sediment to begin to grow from Eren's *human* body, rather than his titan.'

Levi cuts in, frowning. 'It's happened one too many times— We try to prevent full-hardening unless it's essential.' Casting a scowl Eren's way, Levi continues, 'Back in Trost, he was not ordered to harden his titan in order to seal the wall; he did it on his own volition, and because of it, he lost control of his titan, swiped at a soldier, and crystallised half of his body. He doesn't even recall any of it.'

As if hearing what the Captain had said— Which Jean doesn't doubt—, Eren grumbles, sheepishly scratching his nape. It's a comical sight on a figure so imposing. As if to demonstrate his initiative, Eren holds his free hand out, the one not cradling Hange, and tenses his fingers. His blood gargles beneath the surface, his eyes squint, and steam pours from his grit teeth as the tan fabric of his skin bursts, cocooning itself in a pale ice blue. Small flakes of it drip down his hand as the fingers move and clench, testing the flexibility of the crystal. He doesn't demonstrate the additional blow that comes with his armoured hand, but the sight of it is enough to convince Jean it does more than necessary.

Hange hops off of Eren's hand, panting and cheeks red, as they run to the crowd. Eren watches from a distance, head tilted, clearly confused that Hange had decided to run so far when he could've placed them down closer. The crystal begins to melt off his hand, his focus lost. He seems to have a method of clear communication, despite the lack of a voice. Jean wonders how helpless it must feel, sometimes, to have the thoughts and emotions to feel something grand, yet lack the words or communication to express it. It's a cloth stuffed into a dry mouth, a helplessness combated by no other boundary. How many creatures are out there, with the words of the world in the forefront of their mind, yet unable to speak?

He forces himself to pay attention to Hange again. 'The substance that he creates when crystallising is strangely the same material as the stone of the walls. This leads us to hypothesise that if we could make it to Shiganshina, we could plug up the hole once and for all. That's where the Scouts come in.'

In the background, Captain Levi and Hange's assistant zip to Eren's titan, speaking words into his ear that causes Eren to nod, moving to lay down on the ground. Commander Erwin steps in, his bold voice claiming the air. 'We will be tasked with protecting Eren on the way to Wall Maria. We have made two attempts to get to Wall Maria— One was successful, one was not. One we had Eren to help us, the other we did not. Our goal is to use Eren as a contingent to protect us on the way to Wall Maria— Once we reach, we will rest temporarily, allowing Eren to recuperate, before letting him plug the wall. From there, we will eliminate the remaining titans in Shiganshina before redirecting efforts to the entirety of Wall Maria.'

Steam bursts through the air behind him as the titan goes slack, muscles finally relaxing into the dirt. Eyes turn away from the Commander and to the nape of the titan as Levi and the assistant grab an arm each to yank Eren out. Levi hands him his cloak, wrapping it around him as Eren regains his balance. They help him walk back to the recruits, but he barely seems to need the support, eyes bright and alive, if not a little fatigued. The marks beneath his eyes weep a bright red, a more vibrant muscle than the dull crimson they were before. Commander Erwin proudly places his hand on Eren's shoulder, squeezing it tight before releasing.

'Eren is our key to retaking our dignity from the titans.'

Chapter End Notes

writing EMA's reunion was probably the hardest bit to write this whole fic. I still don't think I got it. Are there even words able to verbalise the relief upon seeing a soulmate you thought dead? I went through 4 different versions before settling.

Chapter 8: Kenopsia

Chapter Summary

The solemn atmosphere of an atmosphere that is usually bustling with people but is quiet.

More time reuniting. Troubling news. Time spent with the 104th. The first official movement to retake Wall Maria.

Chapter Notes

....which is where this comes to an end, folks. maybe one day i'll write more. idk. thanks for reading!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

That night, Eren gracefully accepts an extra bread roll from Mikasa.

Armin frets, nibbling on the tip of his spoon with his front teeth. 'And— It doesn't hurt? Turning into something so big, and then getting ripped out?' He frowns, allowing himself to wander for a moment before continuing. 'I mean, Eren, you were always getting hurt when we were kids, but this is— This is *something else*. It has to hurt, right? You felt pain as the titan in Trost.'

Eren waves his hands around, the bread roll in his hand spitting crumbs all over the table, and by proxy, the three of their trays. 'It's an ache I'm long since used to, Armin. I—'

'So how often do they make you transform?' Mikasa leans forward in her seat, her expression murderous as they drift behind Eren, to the Special Operations Squad. Ever since she had witnessed Levi beating him within an inch of his life in court, she'd been understandably protective of Eren, despite his insistence to let him do the worrying. Levi couldn't often get within a mile of Eren without Mikasa glaring at him, trying to stab holes into him with her eyes. He, of course, couldn't care less and could reprimand her if he so chose to, but seeing as it was Eren's childhood crush or whatever she seemed to be to him, he relented.

'Not enough to be torturous,' Eren mumbles, bread roll torn in his mouth, the tough and stiff food dry in his mouth. He tries to soften it with a gulp of water, but all it does is make it too

soggy for him to be comfortable eating. Mikasa frowns, clearly dissatisfied with the answer. He can feel her eyes on his cheeks, on the deep engravings within them.

(He'd actually learned, a bit more recently that he could pridefully admit, that the marks weren't just indents— They were muscle. Raw, true and genuinely exposed muscle. He's normally more attentive than this when it came to his own body, especially for Hange's research, but he'd admittedly been avoiding looking at his face; the marks were a gruesome reminder that he was no longer human, a fact he'd accepted long, long ago, however had yet to acknowledge head-on.

Seeing the fibre thrum with blood disgusted him more than it enamoured him when he'd first seen it in the mirror, but upon some poking and some scratching and prodding, the muscle didn't seem to hurt when touched. He can only assume being ripped out of his own flesh so often had resulted in his skin wearing down. It wasn't so much of a tear of paper from a tight grip, but more so each layer of the paper being torn away, until it went away completely.

Hange had loved his theory, and as punishment for his own curiosity, discussed the details of being in his titan's nape an entire night. He hadn't slept, and if that wasn't bad enough, Levi had decided to quiz him on his academics that day. Needless to say, Levi wasn't happy with Eren's results. Eren blamed Hange for it.)

'Don't worry about these,' he tells her, idly raising a hand to brush against the cuts, 'these are from a long, long time ago. When we first tried to expedition to Wall Maria with me as a titan.' He goes back to eating, hoping the distraction of food will be enough for the two to leave him alone about the markings. Eren's not exactly self-conscious of them, not as much as before, but he didn't like discussing that day with anyone, not even the people who'd been there.

'Well—' Mikasa pauses, clearly having more of a rebuttal on her tongue, but she holds back. 'As long as they're not hurting you..' Her eyes float back to Levi, and her glare deepens.

Armin, bless his soul, is quick to pick up on a new topic. 'So! Eren. How do you like the new recruits? They're all really good friends of ours, so you might like them too.' With a smile that lights up the room, Armin continues, 'you already know Sasha, but do you know Jean and Connie? They were with us when you carried us in Trost.'

'Oh yeah,' Eren snorts, 'Horseface and Bald head.' He chuckles to himself for a moment before shutting himself up— He didn't know these people like Armin and Mikasa. Making fun of them to their faces is like a punch to the gut, something he reprimands himself for even letting slip. Biting off another piece of his bread roll, he opens his mouth to apologise. Eren's pleasantly surprised to hear Mikasa and Armin giggling amongst themselves.

When Armin calms, he tries his best to give an unbiased view of his fellow soldiers. Eren listens attentively, trying to keep on a lookout for anyone that catches his interest. His brows furrow as he thinks about what had happened last night, though he tries not to let his mind wander, keeping his attention on Armin as much as his Commander's words.

'A— Another titan?'

Eren holds his bottom lip captive as he glances between Miche, Erwin, and Levi. Each second that lapses into tense silence has Eren biting down harder and harder. 'You mean the Colossal and Armoured titan could be here, right now? Talking to us, acting like one of us?'

'That's correct,' Miche mumbles, trying not to let his composure slip despite Eren's increasing anxiety. 'I smelled three more people like you. My nose is never wrong, and your scent isn't something to be confused for anything else.' Casting a wary glance at Eren's igniting anger, he trails off, 'So yes. The Colossal and Armoured Titan are amongst us.'

Levi frowns, stepping forward to Eren. Eren glares down at the floor, trying to cave it inwards with his ire alone, his lip beading with dribblets of blood, tiny and spread.

The Captain doesn't know what Eren's thinking— He can hardly imagine what's going through his head with the current situation. His own mother passed in her sleep, deprived and bones, but at least Levi had gotten justice for what had happened to her, knowing she moved on quietly, softly, just as delicate as she was. Eren's mother died in an act of violence, a hate speech from human to human, civil unrest roused from a problem unknown. He watched her die, knew the exact moment her eyes had skewered open in that horrid state of the dawning of death. He heard her final words, saw her final expression, her final actions. Levi hadn't even realised his mother had passed until he was taken away from her.

To know that the very cause of the rock to fall atop Eren's mother, cause her demise, was walking amongst them with a smile of innocence, a carefully crafted naivety, must be killing the kid. He'll struggle trusting the recruits, slip into that violent and angry version of himself that he was when he was younger, and the wound was fresher. Levi couldn't have that.

Raising his hand to Eren's head, he begins carding his fingers through the brown hair. Eren pulls away from his grief-ridden fury to acknowledge the contact, releasing his lip. It's red and gushing with blood that tries to fix the wound he had made, but his titan ability had taken care of it before much blood could spill.

Levi doesn't often touch people at all— A squeeze on the shoulder or a patted back were rare occurrences. Eren was different. Eren was someone he'd seen grow up. Eren was someone only he knew how to handle when he got upset. Eren was someone who'd go straight to his Captain if the brooding thoughts took over and he felt tempted to become another star in the sky. Eren was someone Levi could put aside his discomfort for. He knew gentle fingers detangling his hair helped the boy calm, helped lull him into a comfort he'd only received before his life went through hell and back. It was as if the strands of his hair were jutting memories, and to pull them apart with Levi's fingers was to ensure they all knew one from another, keeping grief with grief and nostalgia with nostalgia.

'I need you to calm down,' he orders Eren, sliding his hand from his hair to his shoulder, 'and I need you to act normal. Act like we'd never had this conversation.'

Eren seems doubtful— Levi can see it in those turquoise eyes, the way they squint and his teeth grits as if to bite back a comment. He knows the other's mannerisms like the back of his own hand, which makes their unspoken dilemmas much easier to deal with than with any other. 'I know you're mad. I know you want to make those bastards pay— Believe me, I wanna have their head rotting on the end of my sword. But if you act out, they'll know that we've caught onto them, and it'll make the situation worse.'

Thinking back briefly, Levi continues. 'Remember on your first night here, when you were a kid? We were all talking about you, and you pretended to be asleep so you could keep gathering information.' Eren nods, seeing the logic— Unfortunately, his brain hastens to disagree, his eyes welling with tears. 'You need to do that now. You need to stay oblivious until we know for certain who it is.'

Glancing over at Miche, Levi withdraws his hand. Eren digs into his pocket and takes out an old handkerchief, offering it to Levi— It has his initials engraved into the corner, the cloth old yet well-kept all the same. Levi rubs his hands clean with it, before handing it back. Again, unspoken dilemmas.

Erwin clears our throat, offering Eren a sharp nod, before looking at Miche. 'Who are our suspects?'

Miche stands at attention once more, and moves forth to Erwin's desk. On the wood, a file of each trainee sits proud and presented, a drawing of their face accompanied with their birth certificate and other relevant documents. Levi leans in from besides Erwin to observe, while Eren scoots up next to Miche, bending over the desk.

'Well— We have a few suspects, which makes our situation a little bit more difficult than I had previously imagined. I had initially caught onto three people first since the smell was more prominent in the air, but in the barracks, it became harder to distinguish what came from the body itself, and what came from contact with Eren while he was a titan.' Grabbing a few files, Miche tosses them to the side in a haphazard pile. 'Ruling out those who were not in contact with Eren when he was a titan, and those who smelled bizarre either way, I've come to a list of these suspects.'

Two scouts didn't exactly appear to stand out— Nameless names and faceless faces. They scored average in everything and had standardised personal comments, reported to be backup during the Battle for Trost. Eren didn't seem to have any reaction to them, so they were put on lower priority for the time being. The next file Miche had turned focus to belonged to one Krista Lenz, a blonde with a cheerful attitude and a determination to her comrades that would get her killed. She had a bright outlook on life and regularly sympathised with those struggling from the Fall. For that, she was well-regarded amongst her peers and often regarded to as their driving force. Her history told her to have lived in the Eastern regions of Rose, living on a farm. It wasn't a surprise— Most parents who wanted riches or justice or protection would send their kids to join the military, a cheap grab at selfish desires.

Her closest friend was Ymir, whose last name, according to her and her files, remained forever anonymous. They stuck by each other frequently, which garnered especial attention from the Scouts. The Colossal and Armoured titans were a pair, they seemed to work in

tandem with one another. They would have to target those close to one another. For that, they crossed out the first two scouts, and moved Krista and Ymir to low priority.

The next two's files couldn't even have been read before Eren had swiped them from the table. He held them protectively to his chest, tightly clenched in his fingers, denting the paper. 'No. Not these two. They— They wouldn't do that.' A fire lighting in his eyes, he continues, 'and!— They were with me when we saw the two titans. There's no way it's one of them. They must have gotten the smell from me.'

Levi narrowed his eyes. 'Eren...'

Though he trailed off. Undeniably, the fact that he'd been with them in Shiganshina as the walls fell was true. It was unknown if one could control their titan remotely, because Eren most definitely couldn't. He glanced over to Erwin, nodding as the Commander had nodded. With that, Mikasa and Armin's files were gently extracted from Eren's hands, like two precious jewels ripped from embedded rock, and dismissed in the pile of the innocent scouts.

The third and fourth remaining files were regarding Jean Kirstein and Connie Springer. Both held in the same group as Mikasa and Armin, Eren had chirped, meaning if anyone knew them well, it would be those two. Jean grew up in the safety of Trost before the Fall and had lived a fairly privileged life, intending to move to the Military Police before he'd changed his mind after the Battle for Trost. Connie Springer grew up in the regions of Wall Maria, in a small town closer to Wall Rose than Maria, and had joined the military for his own pride, to prove something to the people of his village. They'd mounted Eren during the Battle, riding on his shoulders until the supply base, and had seemed to be in good relations with their peers, even if Jean was a little bratty and Connie immature. They were moved to the low priority pile with little refusal.

That left two cadets— Reiner Braun and Bertholdt Hoover. Two from the Southern regions of Wall Maria, who had moved inwards to Rose once they had heard of the Fall. Their families passed away long ago, leaving them to remain orphaned and self-sustaining with two more adolescents their age, Annie Leonhart and Marcel Galliard. Marcel had fallen to the same disease as their family in that southern town, and Annie had graduated to the Military Police. It was bizarre, for the three friends to split up, especially considering how all three of them fell in the top ten of trainees, but Annie had been explained to be isolated, quiet, while Reiner was boisterous and surrounded by people. If they were to ever have drifted apart, it would be under the harsh rule of Training.

'Reiner was the one to ask me about the marks on my face,' Eren mumbles, 'and Bertholdt looked horrified at the sight of me. His reports say he scored lowest in hand-to-hand combat and ODM manoeuvre, though he still came in the top ten.' Scratching his nape, Eren looks up to the other three. Levi grabs his arm and lowers it away from his throat before it can begin to hurt. 'Would it be realistic to assume it were them?'

'I suppose,' Erwin mutters, taking the file from the table, scanning the two carefully, taking them apart with his steely gaze. 'But we can't act rash right now. Act as normal— We will continue observing them until we know it for certain.'

Levi turns to Eren, narrowing his eyes. 'This doesn't mean you are to act buddy-buddy with them, Eren. Maintain a distance. They may ease around you because of your immaturity, but all it would take is one turned back to kill you.'

And to that, Eren nodded, earning an approving huff from his Captain. 'Yes, Heichou. I will not get too close to them.'

He said this, and then proceeded to sneak into their barracks later that night.

Most other Scouts had upped and left after they finished their dinner, eager to get to bed, but Special Operations and most other higher ups were permitted to take their time. With much silent protest and little discussion, Eren had managed to include Mikasa and Armin in this privilege through nepotism. Levi initially wasn't happy with the favouritism, but one mention of him hiding the fact that they were alive from Eren had him falling silent very quick.

Eren lets out a low whistle, spooning another bite of the mushroom soup into his mouth as Armin trails off, his speech conclusive. 'Wow. You're practically joint at the hip with everyone in the 104th, aren't you? Horseface's even been my replacement.' Armin startles, waving his hands around as he assures Eren that "*No-one ever replaced you, Eren, we always made sure of that*". Eren chuckles, nudging his friend beneath the table with his leg. 'Relax, 'Min. I'm only saying that you guys are a lot more approachable without me being all angry and scaring people off.' He prays the tone in his voice isn't too self-deprecating as he says this. Speaking with nothing but the best intentions in mind often always lead to his own criticism.

'It's what protected us from bullies when we were kids,' Armin offers, chuckling when Eren gives him a deadpan look. It was true, at the very least— Eren was so stand-offish and temperamental in their part of Shiganshina that more often than not kids strayed away from the three. Likewise, like vultures flying towards a mass pile of rot, the bullies left them alone. On occasion, they would pounce on Armin should he had been alone, but when Eren caught them, he was hard to shake off, even if he wasn't winning.

Their part of Shiganshina, Eren muses in his own head, that small portion of s crowded city that seemed like Eren's whole world. Things are a lot more complicated, now.

He gestures to Mikasa with his spoon, a teasing smile on his face. 'I think they were more afraid of her than me.' Mikasa flusters at the comment, but does not deny it. She was the only one out of the three to land any sort of effective hit on those bullies.

The hall is mostly empty now, but not everyone has left, evidently. A snarky laugh erupts from behind him, close enough that Eren doesn't get a chance to turn around. Rattling his head, a hand smacks down on his hair and ruffles it hard enough to make his vision tremble. His spoonful of soup splashes over his shirt, and he clicks his tongue, grimacing at the mess.

A hiccup follows in succession. 'Yep! What was there to be afraid of when it came to little titan boy here?!'

Eren juts his head away, rubbing the impact point soothingly as he turns, glaring at Oluo. His cheeks are flushed and his mouth is curled in that ugly way it does when he's drunk. Ever since he's gotten older, he's noticed he's permitted more and more snark than when he was a kid. Maybe it's come with Scouts realising he's not some sarcastic kid, or that his primary guardian is Levi and now he has the sense to run to the Captain if someone acted up. Because of this newfound ability, Eren's been content to return the smack Oluo's given him ever since he first got here.

'You've been drinking again? It's a miracle your liver hasn't killed you, if the titans won't. All I need to do is reel my elbow back into the poor thing and you're dead.'

Oluo snorts, tossing his head back. Again, he smacks a hand down on Eren's head, unaffected by the comment. Meanwhile, an entirely new body rests its arm on Eren's head, pressing their whole weight on him, forcing him to shrink a little. He lets out an affronted noise, enraged at the condescension, dropping his spoon into his bowl. Armin and Mikasa are seeming more and more amused by the minute, and honestly, it's Eren's fault for thinking the first two bullies in his life would support him in these trying times. They watch him suffer as alcohol begins to wade in the air, mere presence intoxicating him.

Petra chuckles, soft and teasing as she pinches Eren's cheek, despite Eren swatting her hands away. 'Eren was soo loud when he was a kid... He'd never keep quiet unless Captain Levi threatened him with more studying.'

Feeling his cheeks turn red, Eren shoves the two Scouts off of him, whipping around in his seat. At the abrupt stench of alcohol filling his nose, he clicks his tongue, waving his hand in front of his nose. 'Have you *all* been drinking?—'

'You want some?' Oluo offers his bottle, waving the glass in front of Eren's face. A bit of the clear liquid lands on Eren's shirt, further dirtying it. He can already imagine the look on Levi's face, especially if he can't explain how the alcohol had gotten there. The captain had prohibited Eren from drinking long ago, not that Eren was old enough to begin, but he'd caught Eren once or twice taking a sip or two with someone or another, and his trust hadn't quite been regained. Eren comforts himself in saying that the rum didn't even taste that good.

The teen shoves the bottle away, curling his lip. Unaffected, Oluo shrugs, taking a long swig.

'He was like...' Petra begins, then trails off, tapping her lip. She falls and leans on Oluo, who reciprocates. They work off of each other like a scale, weighing and balancing one other out. Clearly the alcohol has dimmed their inhibitions, causing Petra to fall silent for a long while.

Armin tilts his head, amused. 'An alarm dog?'

'An alarm dog!' Her counterpart interrupts, laughing once more. Petra clicks her fingers and turns to Oluo, expression adoring as if he'd proposed something profound. Armin shrugs when Eren gives him an apologetic look. The two senior Scouts snort in tandem, stumbling

behind Eren as he silently wishes for them to fall over together. With any luck, they'd pass out like that.

'Right!' The two giggle amongst each other, devolving into snickers when Armin and Mikasa join. Eren is surrounded by enemies, and he wants nothing more than to make them all pay for their transgressions. Petra sighs, continuing as she pats Eren's head like one would a puppy. 'He yaps a lot, but he never bites, does he? Always barking, so loud, so annoying, but he never once bit.'

Petra and Oluo yelp as someone grabs their hoodies from behind, yanking them back. Eld gives Eren an exasperated look, apology written in his eyes. 'Sorry, Eren.. They were stealing everyone else's booze, we couldn't stop them.' Turning to the two in question, his gaze harshens. They sigh, forlorn, as Eld begins to drag them away. 'Captain Levi's going to have your heads tomorrow..!'

'Bastards,' Eren growls, turning back around to Mikasa and Armin. Forcing their smiles to fade as soon as humanly possible for the two of them, Mikasa offers Eren a light giggle. It's an angelic sound, but an unappreciated one as she tells him,

'Seems you found your own crowd as well, Eren.'

He's spent the last few weeks training the new recruits into acclimatising with how the Survey Corps works. They've gone on one scouting expedition through Wall Rose, a gruelling seven days of looping around the regality of Wall Sina, where he managed to assure the rest it was truly safe to take a breath around him. While a handful seemed reluctant, those who seemed to be Armin and Mikasa's friends settled quickly. Eren welcomed all bright smiles.

Except for Horseface— Jean's.

The first time he'd slipped up and called Jean Horseface, he'd been trying to organise sleep roll conditions their first night in the wild. He had everyone up in trees, and arranged them in terms of pairs— If the situation ever came to it, on their expedition to Wall Maria, they needed to take a night to sleep, they had to get used to sleeping up high where titans couldn't reach them without falling and alerting everyone. Eren paired people together based off how well they got along, and how estranged they may have been with one another.

Some pairings were indisputable— Krista would have to go with Ymir, because Ymir refused to warm up to anyone else. Reiner and Bertholdt too were put together, not only due to Eren wanting to keep a close eye on them, but also because Bertholdt had— Eccentric, sleeping habits.

('Are you sure he's alright?' Eren mumbles, a grimace embedding on his face. He can feel the pain in his neck just by watching the man.

Reiner shrugs, laying his sleeping roll out on the branch. 'Bertholdt always sleeps weird, Eren. He's— Ah.. I'm told it's because he has foretelling skills. Judging it—' He looks at Bertholdt, who looks as if he'd slithered down the tree on his stomach, head juttied out and body craning up. 'It looks like rain tomorrow.'

Eren did not like it when it rained the next day.)

With an odd amount of recruits, Eren chose at least someone he semi-knew to sleep with. 'Oi, Horseface. You're with me.' Jean didn't respond for a moment, continuing on with unpacking his things. Eren hadn't even noticed his slipup, not as his fellow soldiers chuckled around him, and clicked his tongue. 'Kirstein! With me!'

He found it amusing when Jean tensed up, clearly processing the name calling, a sweat breaking out on his forehead as he mumbled, tone assent. There was slight scorn in the way he shuffled over to Eren, who had already set up his bedroll against the root of the branch, sitting against the main trunk. They moved in silence, sticking out amongst the cheery, if not fatigued, conversation sparking around them.

The second time he made the same mistake, it was the third day and Eren had brought the troops to a halt to practice their ODM flexibility. He made it a competition, just to create a ranking in his head, pick out the weak points and strengthen them to the best of his ability.

'I will be in this forest moving around,' he told them, 'and your goal is to find me and to take the cloak off my neck.'

An easy goal, all things considered, all they had to do was get close enough to reach for the end of it and yank it off, which would choke him and slow him down monumentally. So when it had come to be half an hour and yet no-one had even gotten close to his cloak, Eren grew irritated.

The issue didn't come with removing his cloak.

The issue came with finding him in the first place.

Apparently he'd moved so far into the forest that the troops were still searching for him, even if at that point it had been thirty minutes of Eren idly swinging back and forth with his grapples. Back when he was a kid, and he went on the ODM for the first time, both with Levi and completely alone, he'd gone to this forest to practice. The branches were spaced out and big enough to avoid and rest on, and below were enough bushes to break harsher falls. Eren knew this forest like the back of his hand, so he was able to move his way back to where they'd started with ease. It didn't ease his irritation.

He first came upon Jean, Connie, and Sasha all talking amongst each other. Dangling from one grapple, he hung from a branch, watching them from above. Connie sighed, hands in his head. 'How far did he go? He didn't leave the forest or something, did he?'

Sasha chuckled, zipping around their surrounding trees. 'It's fine— We don't even have to do much, because in the end Mikasa will find him and we can have lunch!'

'Food is all you can think about, huh,' Jean had muttered, shaking his head.

Eren clicked his tongue. The troops were good soldiers, beyond their previous years, but their laziness always reminded Eren that he had his work cut out for him. He understood Levi and his frequent aggression to the newer recruits. They had the skill, they had the brain, but they lacked the motivation to push unlike other people Eren's met. He knew one speech from Erwin would change them, but he feared irrationally it wouldn't be enough to break through their indifference. It was this troop's main fault, one he made known through,

'Horseface! If you're just gonna stay on the ground the whole time, you might as well start pulling supplies, too!'

Sasha ran head-first into a tree. The air fell into a deadly silence as the three of them looked up to Eren, who launched himself closer, hanging from a lower branch. Jean looked enraged — It wasn't the first time he'd been called that and no doubt Mikasa or Armin might've let something slip about what Eren had said a few weeks prior. Above all else, if there was anything Eren had learned from Jean, it was two things. He was very competitive, and he got envious easily.

'What'd you call me?!'

'What I saw!' And with that, after hearing an angered growl from the teen, Eren sped off.

In the end, despite reckless pursuit from Jean, it ended up being Armin to swoop in from above and steal Eren's cloak, colliding into his body and unbuttoning the cloak for Mikasa to catch. They got some of Eren's bread that night as reward. Needless to say, Jean was not happy.

It had been a few more incidents like that which had led to Jean actively rebelling against Eren. It was one thing to have a bunch of adults much older than him berate him from his immaturity, but it was an entirely different thing to have that immaturity repaid to him ten times. The two bounced off each other, enough so, that at times, Eren would completely forget that there was a power gap between them. Eren was their captain, Eren had the authority to have Jean regretting he ever opened his mouth, but he didn't.

Primarily because of that week-long journey, Jean and Connie's files were shifted out of the suspect pile.

Eren wakes up a few weeks later with dread pooling in his gut.

Today is the day.

Today, the Survey Corps take their third journey outside of Wall Rose.

Eren has no good memories when it comes to leave the safety of the Walls, which is ironic, considering those mass collections of stone and brick are exactly the things he hates the most. That hatred doesn't simply just shine from himself, it comes from people long before him. Hatred, and pity. He doesn't understand why, but thinking of the Walls, thinking of the people living within, thinking of how they'll never know more than beyond their pens, it makes him feel an unshakable weight of pity. He's sorry for them. He's sorry for their naivety. It's a blessing, but also a curse.

He knew these emotions weren't his. At times he'd forget what belonged to him, and what didn't. Eren tried not to let anyone else find out.

Getting up from bed, Eren glances outside the window, to the creeping sun. It tints the world an ugly red, as it coating it all in a layer of thick blood, indifferent to who it belongs to. The trees cascade long shadows that reach for Eren through the window, attempting to draw him back into the grief he's been ignoring for so long. That, at least, he knows is his own emotion.

'Morning,' Eld mumbles to him, stretching his hands over his head in the bunk across from him. Eren offers a weak smile, pushing himself out of his bed, hands grabbing idly at sheets to straighten them. Levi's bunk is spotless, and Hange's is a mess, but both are empty. He clicks his tongue at their absence— The only reason he'd slept here was for them to wake him up earlier. 'Today's the day, huh? Simple recon.'

'Mhm,' Eren mumbles, rubbing at his eye as he stretches, shuffling to the door. 'See you.'

It's nice to know he still is able to have idly chatter like that, even with who he is. So much in his life is unorthodox, tragic and stricken, that the feign moments of peace he receives, they're blessings, prayers finally granted upon him. His mind is so far beyond his body, exploding with knowledge he can't comprehend, that he always forgets to look at the smaller things, the calmer things, the sinking of loving sea foam after a crashing wave.

With a quick peak into his troop's barracks, he notes most of them are asleep, peaceful and quiet, so he shuts the door with a soft thud and hurries onwards, towards Erwin's office. It's habit, muscle memory, to wake up and immediately report to his Commander— Eren doesn't even acknowledge his own movement until he's at the door to Erwin's office.

The Commander, predictably, is awake and looking through recon formations when Eren steps inside. The man barely glances up past a flicker, before letting a ghost of a smile taunt his lips. It feels like a reward in itself. 'Excited?'

Eren huffs, letting himself fall down on Erwin's couch with abandon, melting into the cushion. 'I just— Going out there is certain death. If the traitors decide to attack us, it's open plains and two titans against one.' Idly the boy takes out his pocket knife and begins thumbing over the map engraved into the wood, the singular gold home in the centre of his focus. He trails his thumbnail from his home to the outer gate, minutes of running completed in the swift flick of his finger. 'I worry for them, for everyone— If- If the titans are apart of the 104th training squad, they'd've grown with them for three years. What if realising two of them are like me crushes their morale? Pushes them to give up?'

Eren is no stranger to the feeling of complete hopelessness. An inability to escape reality, comforted only the solace and peace death will bring. He's felt it for so many years through so much agony of ripping himself from his own body, fighting the temptation of his titan's fallacies, that the fact that he still holds hope for an equally as beautiful sunset the next day is a miracle. Had he no-one to push for, and dare he say, no Mikasa nor Armin, Eren would have been gone a long, long time ago.

'You have to have faith in them,' Erwin says after a long pause. 'Everyone on the field wants to live as much as you do. None of them crave a death in which they're crushed and digested by a mindless giant. They will do all in their power to stay alive, just like you.' His words hang in the air long after spoken. Eren stares at the stone ceiling, eyes tracing each crevice, contemplating. He can feel Erwin's gaze on him, moreso when he hears the man sigh, leaning on his desk with folded elbows. 'Eren, I've never known you to hesitate. I've never known you to think twice before putting yourself in danger. Everyone crazy enough to join the Scouts is exactly the same. It's because of those traits that we are alive. You've trusted us to keep you safe. Now trust us to keep ourselves safe, too.'

Eren huffs, a smile tracing his lips. 'Yes, Commander.'

'Good. Now go and get ready. Presentation means as much as morale.'

Hooves crush forgiving soil and splatter its remains into the air as the 57th Scout Expedition sets off to scout the route to Shiganshina.

Eren doubts he has ever felt this antsy since he was a kid and leaving the headquarters for the first time. He worries at his lip in an attempt to calm his racing brain, but it makes everything worse. Erwin's voice is the only thing keeping him sane right now, and even then, he still frets. Mikasa was the top performer in her class, and Armin was fifth, which means they're perfectly capable of their own, but anything can happen. You could be the top performer in the world like Levi and still have your head bitten off before you even feel the pain.

"Scream until someone comes to help you. We always have your back."

As if to sense his discomfort, Petra clicks her horse faster and matches pace with him, offering him a smile. Whatever she's comforting him for specifically, he can't figure out, but he offers his bravest grin anyways and turns back ahead. Wind whips his ears as they continue riding— it stings the slightest only to smooth over with the cold tint it breaths onto his skin. Levi races ahead of him, alongside Erwin. This has always been their formation as far back as Eren can remember, even in patrol routes in Wall Rose— The Special Operations Squad in the centre, protected by everyone else scattered around them. Mikasa is to the west of him, Armin to the south-east, far from his line of sight. He'd been prohibited from worry about them regardless.

The sherman tree forest begins to peak over the horizon, drawing a sigh of exasperation from Eren's throat— They haven't made it that far.

Erwin abruptly skids to a stop, narrowly missing his crew crashing into him. Eren startles as he glances at his Commander, then the haunted look on his face. He all but wheels around to look in the direction from whence they came, his teeth gritting and his grip on his reigns tightening subconsciously. Levi's eyes narrow, but his expression otherwise doesn't change. 'An abnormal in the rear echelon...' He turns to Erwin, whose jaw is set tight. 'We're not far enough at all for an abnormal.'

'It must be the traitors,' Erwin mutters, turning to face Petra. 'Who were the new recruits in the rearguard? Note their names down and cross check with our suspects.'

Petra leans to her right and digs in her saddlebag, shakily withdrawing a notebook from within. She's always been formidable when it comes to killing titans, but the presence of an abnormal is enough to make her heart begin to race. It's the same with all the other Scouts— Comfort lies in the predictable, not the unpredictable. 'Reiner Braun, Jean Kirstein, and Armin Arlert, sir. They should be the guard in the direction of the flare.'

Erwin hums. Shooting his hand out, he gestures to Oluo. 'Report to the eastguard, and Petra the west. We're making a detour through the forest.'

Another flair screams through the pristine sky, Levi's steel eyes landing on Eren as the younger's breath hitches. Their souls bonded as one, Armika whinnies beneath Eren, pacing uncomfortably in her spot. 'Eren. Stick close. You've made no secret of your ability. They're after you.'

'That doesn't exactly help my case, Captain,' Eren mutters, scratching at his nape. His nails draw away slightly red and buried with dead skin.

Erwin wastes no time in sending the two soldiers off, spinning around and shooting off. The other Scouts lag behind for a mere second, Eren clutching his eyes tight as he hears the rupturing of flares chasing behind them. Armin was apart of the southguard, he prays that he's okay. If Armin died so early on, after only just returning to Eren, Eren'll never forgive himself. He was meant to protect Armin, and he would have died not having known where Eren was. Alone, and brutally.

'Eren! Keep up!' Levi screams, that familiar scowl forming on his face. Eren lets the wind freeze his tears as he opens his eyes, and lets out a growl as he spurs forward.

No-one is going to die. Not on his watch.

Gunther's scream is cut short as his body slams into the tree. Wood shatters around his form as he lays there, spine split in two, ODM grapples hanging limp from his body. Blood weeps into the timber like blood staining paper. He is dead. Eren knows it well.

Hooves beat down in his ears. His heart races in his head, pounding and pulsing. The ground shakes as each thud of the Female Titan's form comes closer. Levi clicks his tongue, ducking his head, mourning in his own way. 'Eren. Make your decision now. Trust us, or yourself.'

Eren closes his mouth, trapping the gaseous taste of blood in his mouth. His teeth grit against one another as he risks a hand free of his reigns, wiping his tears off. 'I won't let his death be in vain.'

Nothing in Levi's body changes. 'Very well. You know what to do. Eld! With me, into the trees.'

Chapter End Notes

Thank yoy for sticking around :DD

End Notes

Comments, Kudos, and Criticisms are VERY welcomed, thank you for reading!!

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